

Ask a Master Gardener
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Georgia Gold Medal Plants for 2016

Question: What is the Georgia Gold Medal Plant Program?

Answer: The Gold Medal Plant Program promotes the use of superior ornamental plants in Georgia. It represents the combined effort of the State Botanical Garden of Georgia; the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension; University faculty members; and nurserymen, flower growers, garden retailers and landscape professionals across the state. Winners are chosen from five categories, including natives, annuals, perennials, trees, shrubs and vines and groundcovers. The winners for 2016 in five of the categories are some that you should be able to purchase locally and plant with success.

Persian Shield is an annual that does well in sun to part shade. The Gold Medal website describes it this way: "Vibrant variegated bright and dark purple foliage on this plant is highlighted with a metallic sheen and green rib. Persian Shield makes a stunning 18"-36" mass planting and glows next to companions with silver or chartreuse foliage. It fills a container well, handling heat, humidity and drought better than most annuals. Wait until the soil is warm enough for tomatoes to plant Persian shield, unless you are in South or Coastal Georgia, where this plant can be a perennial. Pinch this plant back to get thicker, sturdier growth." You may find this beautiful plant in local nurseries.

The native plant for this year is the Native Azalea. It grows best in part shade. There are over 12 different species of native azaleas in Georgia, and they hybridize freely, creating different colored blooms. Many of the flowers are white but they come in shades of pink, yellow, orange and red, too. The growth habit is from four to fifteen feet high. Look on the front campus of the University of West Georgia to see a magnificent orange specimen. The flowers of the native azalea look similar to honeysuckle flowers with their protruding stamens, and I have heard someone refer to them as a honeysuckle bush, but they are not related to honeysuckle. The earliest bloomers send forth flowers before the leaves emerge. Other species flower after leafing out. Different species bloom at various times throughout the summer and into the fall. It would be possible for different native azaleas to be blooming in your yard for an extended time. Several species of this attractive native plant may be found at the Carroll County Master Gardener plant sale on May 7.

The perennial plant of the year is the Pineapple Lily. It is a South African native and the flowers look like a pineapple on a stalk. This plant is described as deer resistant and can be clustered into a groundcover or planted into a container plant. Most species of pineapple lily are perennial to Zone 8, and will have to be overwintered or treated as an annual in cooler North Georgia. Carroll County is in zone 7B so this plant is what might be referred to as a tender perennial. It may have to be taken inside for the winter, or if it is in a protected habitat it may make it through the winter and return the following year.

Distylium is the winner of the shrub category. It must be grown in full sun to part shade. This means a sunny location with afternoon shade should be perfect for it. The description from the Gold Medal Plant website: “Distylium can take drought, heat and wet feet. Deer don't prefer it, but may munch. After hearing those facts, this plant's glossy evergreen foliage in varieties with upright to spreading forms that range from three to ten feet tall, is almost icing on the cake! Distylium is considered a tougher, disease resistant alternative to cherry laurels, junipers, hollies, Indian hawthorn, and box- wood.”

Blackgum is this year's selection in the tree category. It needs full sun to part shade. It is a mid-size tree growing from 30-50 feet high, according to the National Forestry Service. It was chosen in the Gold Medal tree category for its interesting characteristics: bright scarlet to rich maroon fall color, spring flowers that attract bees, and bluish-black fall fruit for wildlife to enjoy. Some of the wildlife that are drawn to blackgum are robins, brown thrashers, flickers, thrushes, foxes, wild turkeys, woodducks, woodpeckers and mockingbirds. Blackgum can grow in lowland wet areas and in upland habitats, where it has a high drought tolerance.

For more information on Gold Medal Plants or other horticultural questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Extension Carroll County Office, at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton at 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu.