

Plant Information

Heritage or Heirloom Plants – A Definition

By Elin Doehne, Native Plants/Heritage Plants Chairman WACONIAH August 2007

“What is an heirloom or heritage plant?” is one of the first questions that comes to mind when we start talking about saving heirloom seeds and plants. As is usual with botanical and horticultural definitions, there are some fine points of disagreements, but the following is a definition that’s generally agreed upon: Heirloom plants and seeds are those cultivated varieties which have been passed down and preserved from generation to generation.

Generally, it is agreed that they should have the following three characteristics.

1. They need to have been grown at least 50 years ago.
2. They are open-pollinated and breed true to type. In other words, the offspring must look like its parents.
3. They have a history. We know where they came from, who grew them and how they were conserved over time.

The terms “heritage” and “heirloom” seem to be interchangeable in the plant literature and indeed, both may be defined as something treasured that is handed down from generation to generation. There may be better definitions out there. If you have a definition which you feel is superior to the one above, by all means submit it. While we’re at it, let’s define several other horticultural terms that are sometimes in question. Again there are generally accepted definitions.

Native plant – one which grew here in North America before European settlement.

Wildflower – a flowering plant which can make it on its own in the wild. It is not necessarily a native species.

Thus we have native wildflowers – here before European settlement – and adapted wildflowers – species introduced from outside North America or from other regions within the continent which have then naturalized. The common field daisy, *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum* L. is an example of an introduced European species that has successfully adapted to the wild. California poppy, *Eschscholtzia californica*) is an example of a North American species which has been introduced into and has adapted to other areas of the continent. A weed is simply a plant out of place. It grows where we don’t want it to grow. It can be a native or non-native. It is often an aggressive, invasive species and in many cases is a non-native. Purple loosestrife, *Lythrum salicaria*, is an example of an attractive, introduced, flowering plant that has aggressively invaded wetlands

Stevia – The Herb

Excerpts from *The Mahonia* by Barbara Crites, Herb Chairman of Oregon WACONIAH August 008

I discovered the herb stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*) while looking for plants for my garden – noticing the plant, I asked about its attributes. The stevia’s leaves can be dried and pulverized to make a sweetener that is 30 times sweeter than sugar in its unprocessed form. It is native to Paraguay and grows from Texas to Arizona and south. It belongs to the daisy family, compositae. The plant is named in honor of Dr. P.J. Esteve, a professor in botany at Valencia. It has been used for hundreds of years by Guarana Indians and others to sweeten bitter caffeine-rich mate (a tea) and many other beverages.

Piqueria, commonly grown as stevia, grows about 2 feet tall, is woody stemmed with 3 cleft leaves that are not divided with heads of small white, pink or purple flowers in ordinary soil, tolerating sun or shade. Propagation is by division in spring. Pinch off flower buds, as if plants are allowed to flower, they droop and become dormant. Cut plant back hard after harvesting, leaving a few leaves, and grow them indoors in pots watering only when the soil feels dry. Home-grown stevia tastes better than store-bought, because most stevia available in food stores is made of stems as well as leaves.

Berries of Alaska

By Mildred Shaw, California WACONIAH August 2008

Many kinds of berries, wild and cultivated, grow in Alaska. Wild berries include blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, cranberries, salmonberries, crowberries, bearberries, among others. Berries have a short growing season. Even with the coming of summer and the long days of endless sunlight, the

cold keeps a grip on much of Alaska. All but the southern coastal area has a mean annual temperature below freezing. Snow may fall in June and autumn arrives in August. One can dig into the earth at any time during the summer, and in many places and will find the ground frozen a foot or so down.

Berries may have only 6 – 10 weeks to grow. Many are small and compact and may be groundhuggers, growing low along the surface. They grow best where the layer of permafrost is thin and roots can penetrate the soil. The Alaskan Blueberry seems to be the most important. They grow on a medium sized bush. They grow best in a wet, humid forest area. When ripe these berries may only be ¼ inch in size and will be a dark, waxy green. A few may be bluish black. Because of their excellent flavor, hikers and campers like them. July and August is the time to find these berries. Cranberries, *Oxycoccus palustris*, are related to the bilberries, blueberries, and huckleberries. Cranberries are the all-around edible berry. A creeping shrub that may be less than six inches high, lowbush cranberries are best picked right after the first frost. The bog cranberry requires plenty of water but even then the fruit will be small.

The salmonberry, *Rubus spectabilis*, grows fairly well in this northern and Arctic climate. This berry furnishes winter food for many native Alaskans. Salmonberry is a close relative of the raspberry, sharing the fruit structure with the fruit pulling away from its receptacle similarly. The berries are sweet but soft and must be eaten or used at once. In Kodiak, orange salmonberries are called "Russian berries." The crowberry, *Empetrum nigrum*, grows on a low, evergreen plant and produces black berries. These berries are an important food to the native Alaskans in remote parts of the state. Crowberries make excellent juice and can be dried and stored for winter use.

Bearberries, *Arctostaphylos*, are a species of dwarf shrubs that are adapted to arctic and subarctic climates, and have a circumpolar distribution in northern North America, Asia and Europe, one with a small highly disjunct population in Central America. The name is derived from the edible fruit greatly enjoyed by bears. The fruit is edible and gathered for food. The leaves of the plant are used in herbal medicine. Other Alaskan berries include gooseberries, baneberries, black hawthorn berries and huckleberries. Many berries have leathery or waxy surfaces that help retard evaporation. Alaskans look forward to berry season and may have their own favorite berry location. However, everyone knows that the grizzly bear is the greatest berry lover of them all. Grizzlies need a tremendous amount of berries to satisfy their tremendous appetite, so berries must be shared.

Not your grandmother's Coleus . . .

Solenostemon scutellarioides

By Jean Engelmänn, Improved Cultivars Chairman WACONIAH August 2009

Coleus is a member of the mint family *Lamiaceae* and has been a staple in many gardens since the 1800s. The leaves were typically a broad oval with toothed edge. Colors were pink to burgundy, green and white. The plants were often used in borders or mixed with flowering annuals. They range from low-growing under 12 inches to more than three feet in height. Frequent pinching of coleus will make them bushy. They can be easily propagated in water from stem cutting. They make good houseplants or can be kept in water over winter ready to plant outside in the spring. The two problems that coleus are most likely to have are insect damage to the leaves or root-rot due to overwatering.

A renewed interest in coleus has resulted in many new varieties and cultivars. A wide color pallet with every color except blue is available. The traditional color pattern of a band of contrasting color along the leaf edge has evolved to splashes of color and even solid color. Leaves vary from tiny oval leaves to huge broad leaves, frilly scalloped leaves, sharply lobed leaves and other leaf variations. More sun-tolerant cultivars (Sun-coleus) are being introduced and the nursery tags say plant in sun or shade. (In our Las Vegas climate they will probably need, at least, dappled shade in the afternoon.) The Wizard series has a variety of bright colors on compact plants. The Carefree series has a variety of colors with deeply lobed leaves.

Last year I planted 'Mosaic,' from the Kong series that features large leaves. It has a rounded undulating leaf, which is wider than it is long. The colors are a splash of green, white, pink and burgundy with no repeat pattern from leaf to leaf.