Looking for ideas for your landscape? Often a special plant addition will change the look or add an accent. Consider some new plants for your Central Florida Garden.

Southern Living Magazine recently partnered with Monrovia Nursery to test over 1600 plants for southern gardens. As a result, they released a list of over 200 new varieties adapted to southern growing conditions. This new product line, Southern Living Series, focuses more on growing conditions we are faced with such as heat, humidity and drought tolerance. While these have not necessarily been tested by the University of Florida in local trial gardens, daring gardeners will want to try them on an experimental basis.

Many of these new selections are improvements of old time favorites. Plant profiles can be found on their web site at http://monrovia.com. Call 1-888-PLANT-IT for a list of local nurseries carrying their product line.

How are new varieties discovered? Most times, plant breeders experiment with seedling crosses. Plants are hand pollinated using selected parent plants. Seeds are collected, grown and observed for a variety of characteristics which would be improvements over the parent plants. Sometimes, workers observe a variation in plants grown in the nursery and continue to propagate the unusual plant from cuttings. These clones are identical to the unusual plant and are cultivated for their desired characteristic. This is how weeping forms or dwarf forms are often developed. The nurseries or scientists name the selected clones as cultivated varieties or cultivars.

Plant names can be confusing. Gardeners have many different names for the same plant. These are called common names. You are probably already familiar with many varieties of roses, junipers, marigolds and hollies. Even in the nursery trade, plants go by several different common names making landscape specification and shopping a bit confusing. A more accurate way to request plants is by their scientific name.

Plants are named with Latin scientific names to help scientists and horticulturists classify them according to how they are related to each other. The first word represents the broad classification or genus and the second word represents the more closely related sub-category or species. When cultivars are named, an additional name is added in single quotes. The genus is capitalized and the species is always lower case letters. The first letter in the cultivar is capitalized. Latin names are often underlined or written in italic while the cultivar is in plain text.

For example, the new rich blue plumbago (common name) we are seeing is probably the new cultivar, Plumbago auriculata 'Monott'. The old garden favorite, Plumbago auriculata, has lighter blue flower clusters. Plumbago is very drought tolerant, requiring only occasional water after establishment. You often see it used for color at highway interchanges in our area. The new blue is much more vivid against the pale green leaves.

To make the name game a little more confusing, plant breeders or nurseries may patent a cultivar to protect their lengthy and expensive investment in developing the new plant type. For example, Monrovia has patented the new Plumbago auriculata 'Monott' as Royal Cape ® Plumbago. Patented plants can not be propagated for commercial trade by other nurseries so they are only available from limited approved sources. That does not prevent another nursery from discovering a similar type and giving it a different name.

Local nurseries also carry many attractive plants for your gardens. If you are unfamiliar with the plant, ask the nursery worker if they have them planted in a demonstration area or how long they have been
working with the particular cultivar. Some nurseries have sample landscapes so you can see how plants hold up in shade or dry areas.

Ask for climate zone rating, sun or shade tolerance and soil moisture requirements. Last but not least, how well does the plant tolerate pests such as nematodes, insects and disease. All new plants should be evaluated on these criterion but pest resistance is becoming even more important as we look to least toxic pest management strategies. With water such a limited commodity in our area, drought tolerance is a critical concern. We need varieties that will establish quickly, within a few months, then survive on natural rainfall.

This is a great time to visit nurseries and display gardens such as Leu Gardens in Orlando to find some new plants for your landscape. Take a stroll and a notebook and get creative. For more information on plants for Central Florida gardens, contact the Osceola Master Gardeners at the Osceola County Extension Office. Call them or stop by on Mondays to Fridays from 10am to 2pm at (321) 697-3000. You can reach them at the web site at epabon5@ufl.edu

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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