

SIMPLE

Landscaping gets streamlined

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"It's all in how you use them," she said. "You just have to choose one color or one family of colors to use together."

Although the bold, bright colors of impatiens and petunias are a Michigan container and garden bed mainstay, Morris says the unique colors and easy care of vegetative annuals, patented hybridized plants that exploded on the market in the last decade, get more exciting every year.

This year Morris says there's a high demand for the wild colors and hearty growth of the new coleus hybrids.

"Coleus used to be a grandma plant, but now it stands three feet tall with leaves the size of your hand," she said. "The colors are appealing and dramatic, and if you just have one of those on the porch it makes a strong statement."

Ditto for the never-before-seen lime green tones of the Queen Margarethe plant and the striking bronze-purple shades of the sweet potato vine.

Shades of purple, chocolate or burgundy foliage, often referred to as "black plants" are hotter than ever, thanks to mounting passion for tropical plants and flowers. Some to try? Black Magic elephant ears, caladium and cannas are all striking and have proved successful during Michigan's summers.

Uncomplicated fun
Beyond design, color and care issues, the push for minimal fuss has inspired a new way of thinking, too, says Rubert.

"The big thing is that gar-

dening should be fun, not work," she said.

To that end, she says tool manufacturers are working hard to take the pain out of the process by churning out more innovative products than ever.

Ergonomic tools — with adjustable and/or cushioned handles — are finding a big market among gardeners with carpal tunnel syndrome, arthritis or just those seeking an easier way to do things. Also making planting and tending easier is the Gardener's Hold-all Tote Bag, which Rubert says she expects to sell a lot of this year. They feature pockets for every garden tool and product imaginable — from twine and tools to seed packets, plant markers and a cell phone.

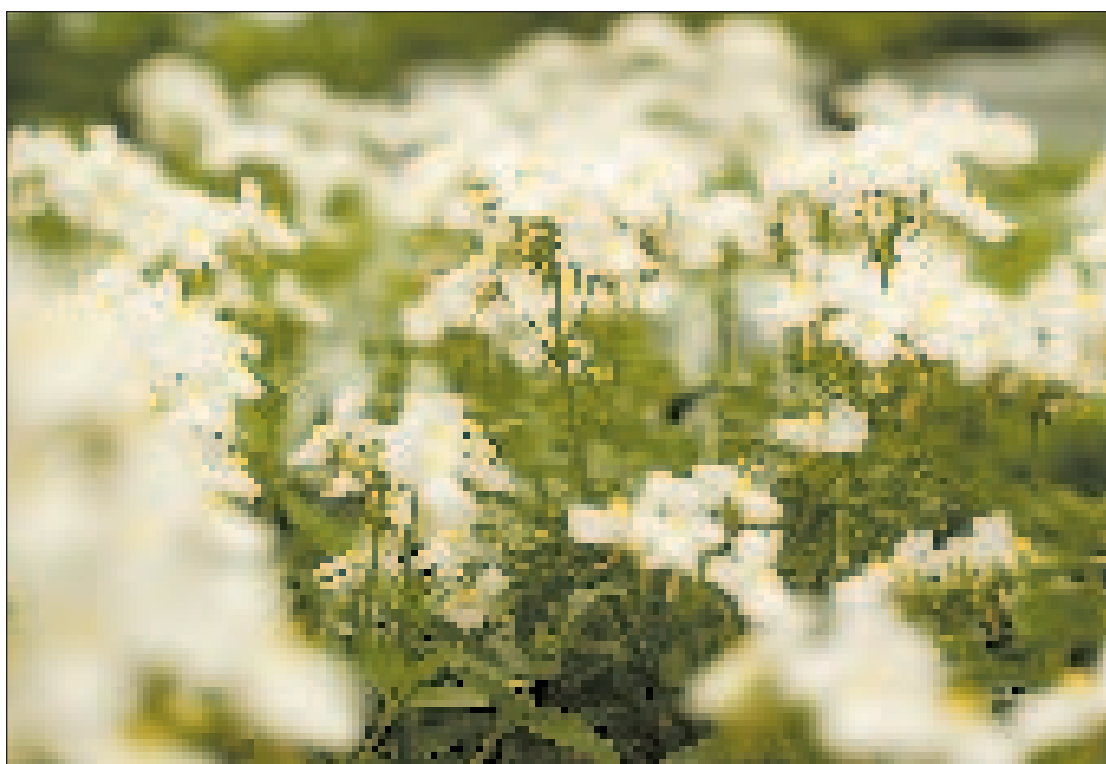
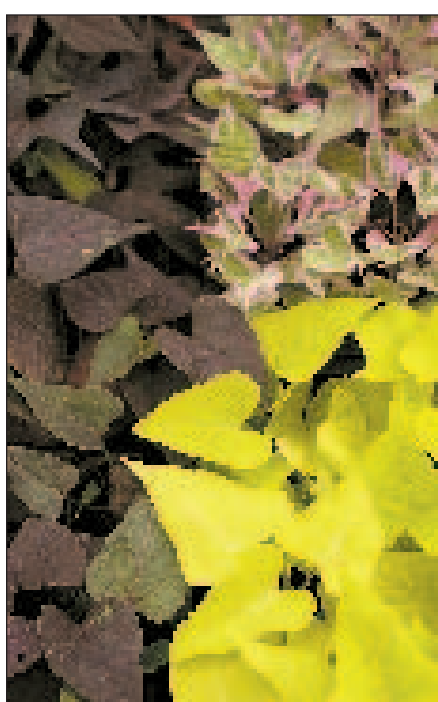
Mitchell says one of the best products she's got on her shelves this year is an Oriental-style hand sickle. She says it's heavy duty, but easy to carry and sharp as a knife.

"I don't know about popular, but it's one of the best garden tools I've ever used," she said.

Some complicated tools that are losing ground — literally and figuratively — are pest-repellent chemicals and fertilizers. Rubert says she's witnessing a "green revolution" as the organic side of the gardening industry gets stronger every year. It's one she's happy to see.

"It's important to think about what we're using and why we're using it," she said. "If you use fewer chemicals, you'll make the soil healthier, which will make your plants healthier to resist bugs and disease."

One way to keep soil hale and hearty? When it comes to topsoil, use organic mulch, says Mary Thomas,



Record-Eagle/Lara Neel

At left, sweet potato vines in four varieties (clockwise from bottom right): lime green, black heart, black and tricolor. Above, Nemesia on display at Breeze Hill Nursery.

co-owner and manager of Northwoods Landscaping and Nursery. Northwoods offers natural mulch options — usually one hardwood and one pine mulch — which aren't dyed or treated chemically.

"It's just healthier for the plant," she said.

As for pesticides, Thomas says they're rarely necessary.

"Insects in this area tend to run their course," she says. "We don't recommend using pesticides unless it's a grave situation."

Of course, if you want to go truly simple, with the ultimate in pest-free, chemical-free, minimal-care ease, there's a final trend that's sweeping the area: boulders.

"We're getting a lot of requests for boulder placements," said Thomas. "A lot of bigger homes with the minimalist landscapes are asking for them."

Although a rock garden likely won't replace any other kind of growing garden, a few big rocks strategically placed can add a different texture and take up some extensive lot space, she said.

Lynda Twardowski is a local freelance writer.

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