

2016 Perennial Trial Report, Year 1

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Eupatorium 'Baby Joe'

Eupatorium 'Baby Joe' was the stand-out in the first year of the 2016-2017 ASCFG cut flower perennial trial. This charming filler flowered well in mid to late summer of the first year, producing 12- to 36-inch long stems of small fuzzy, purplish pink flowers. One trialer commented that the color blended well with the "pink/burgundy/grey colors that are popular in wedding work right now." Plants produced an average of three stems each, with some trialers getting up to seven. The cultivar name 'Baby Joe' refers to the fact that this is a shorter version of the native species, which occurs in the eastern United States and Canada. Is this good, considering that we like our cut flowers to have long stems? In this case yes, since it is not too short and the flower heads are more compact and showy. Since 'Baby Joe' is reported to grow up to five feet tall, we are expecting longer stems next year. Plants should be cold hardy in Zones 3 to 9. It should be noted that the various eupatoriums have undergone changes in their scientific names: *Eupatorium* 'Baby Joe' is actually *Eutrochium dubium* 'Baby Joe' and you might find it under that name.

A second filler flower, *Filipendula* 'Venusta', also performed well for some trialers, but hasn't yet flowered for others. It produces large clusters of small soft pink blooms that some also harvested in the bud stage, or in the "pod" stage, after the petals had dropped. The common name, queen of the prairie, gives you an idea of its elegance. Plants produced one or two stems ranging in length from 10 to 36 inches. This plant is native to the north central U.S. in Zones 3 to 8. Reports say that it does best in the shade, but can be grown in the sun if kept very moist. We will see what our trialers tell us next year.

Another native species, *Stokesia* 'Mel's Blue', showed potential in the first year for its large purplish blue flowers. Stem length was still quite short, however, ranging from 10 to 18 inches. The native form of this species, *Stokesia laevis*, is found in the southeastern U.S. and is cold hardy in Zones 5 to 10. Note that stokesia flowers will close at night, which might limit sales. Makes a great story to tell customers, however.



Stokesia 'Venusta'

Interpreting the trial results: The numbers reported are averages of all the respondents, and many factors will affect the success of any plant species. Our participants are growing and harvesting the trial plants using several methods. After looking at the average, check the range of responses listed below each number to see how the cultivar performed at its best and its worst. If the range of responses in the ratings is narrow and high, i.e., 3-5 or 4-5, the plant was a winner for most of the respondents and is likely to do well for you. The 'Repeat Again Rating' is particularly important because it indicates if the trialer would take the time, money, and space to actually grow the cultivar again. Review the trial results carefully. If a cultivar sounds interesting, but did not appear to do well, try it anyway; it may work well for you.

Acknowledgments: A major thank you to each of the 11 evaluators who returned their trial reports. We also want to thank Pioneer Garden for providing such great varieties. Congratulations to Jeanie McKewen for being the first trialer to return the evaluations this year! We would also like to thank Nathan Jahnke, Ben Bergmann, and Peyton Daly for assisting with the NCSU trials, as well as Linda Twining and Emma Denman for repacking and shipping the liners. In preparing the report we did a bit of editing of the comments for space and clarity; our apologies if we've altered the tone or content of anyone's comments.

Supplier

Pioneer Gardens
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Trialers

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Wild Scallions Farm
Timberlake, North Carolina
Zone 7b

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Happy Trails Cut Flower Farm
Dennis, Mississippi
Zone 7b

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Zone 7

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Carlisle, Pennsylvania
Zone 6

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Zone 5b

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Ardelia Farm & Co.
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Zone 3b

Jeanie McKewen
Brightflower Farm
Stockton, Illinois
Zone 5

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Sabatia Flower Farm
Centerville, Massachusetts
Zone 7a

Paula N. Rice
BeeHaven Flower Farm
Bonners Ferry, Idaho
Zone 3/4

Richard Uva
Seaberry Farm
Federalsburg, Maryland
Zone 7a

Emily Watson
Stems Cut Flowers
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Zone 5

Summary of Comments

The number in a parenthesis refers to the number of respondents who made the comment. If no number is present, only one person made the comment. Comments by each individual are separated with a semicolon (;). Note: many respondents did not make specific comments on each cultivar and in some cases, comments have been shortened because of limited space.

Astrantia 'Roma'

Good qualities: Astrantia did best in full sun, I had it in cloth, I planted the other half in the shade and it did not thrive there, the florist market and wedding design market loves this; Long lasting; Nice size flower, producing several small flowers on each stem adds to our bunches, good color easy to grow; Unique flower.

Problems: Short (2); It is not a showy flower, but a very desirable "filler" flower for the wedding industry; Hoping for longer stems next year; Plants did not do well, very little growth, then died back in the heat and humidity of summer.

Notable insects/diseases: None (4).

Additional comments: Similar to strawflower (2); We also purchased 100 of these bare-root from Pioneer one month earlier, they rooted better than the plugs we received, we were able to harvest about 3 stems per plant of the bare-root ones first year, stems were still pretty short (10-15 inches) but we're hopeful for next season, this plant handled our extremely dry summer well!; Plants were healthy and vigorous, but hardly flowered and no stems were usable, looking forward to their second year; Plants were planted out in the field within a couple days of receipt, they were very small and we planted them according to the instructions given and it was too much space and they were engulfed by weeds, after about 6-7 weeks, we dug up and repotted into gallon pots to grow on and will replant next spring; Low vigor with this species; All of these plants died; I did not harvest any stems this year.

Postharvest handling: No special handling required.

Eryngium ‘Big Blue’

Good qualities: In general we love this form of eryngium.

Problems: Difficult to establish.

Additional comments: Plugs were quite yellow and weak on arrival (4), about 25% died, and the others produced a few tiny green leaves, but don’t look especially “established”, they may surprise me and be great next year, but they seemed unhappy on arrival and never appeared to recover; We have planted many, many eryngiums (and killed quite a few), it seems that if they establish, they are amazing, they often die down in late summer, but reappear in spring, we have definitely lost more than we’ve had success with, these plants arrived in very rough shape and did not have a great chance of success, however, I also received a full flat of this same plant from Pioneer a few weeks earlier, and they also really struggled to establish, we will need to decide on its merits next season after they come back; The ones that lived just never seemed to grow, plants are still extremely small in the field; Our plants did not flower this year, 71% of the plants died over the summer; This one did not take off at all, I never saw any plants take hold and grow; We potted into gallons to grow on and will plant in the field in the fall; Due to their late arrival, this plant did not survive our field, staff too busy for constant hand watering to get established.

Eupatorium ‘Baby Joe’

Good qualities: Awesome filler flower, has a very desirable “muddy”-type color of pink/purple, super drought tolerant which makes it more versatile and easy to grow (this is weird because apparently it grows wild in marshy ditches in certain parts of the USA), it would fill up a bouquet very fast which is a big bonus; Lovely pink color nice form, great filler looks great with pink/burgundy/grey colors that are popular in wedding work right now, vigorous, fast growing, stays short and doesn’t shade other plants around it, can

grow dense in rows to maximize production; Vigorous and quick to establish; Nice spray to fill wholesale market bouquets; Flowers are tall and strong, foliage is clean; Nice flower color, size and shape easy to grow. Editor’s note: See also Postharvest article in this issue.

Problems: Color is dull pink or purple (2); Not a valuable main flower;

None, it’s great that it isn’t as crazy tall as the regular; Short vase life, we harvested when flowers were in bud, as we did not care for the frizzy open flowers. perhaps they’d last longer if harvested later; It’s a nice plant with compact size, easy to grow and adaptable, early to flower and fairly long lasting, just no “wow” factor about it, it will be good for a filler but certainly not feature flower; Deer love these, the color was unique, hard to mix with other blooms unless working on a muted palette; Open flowers dull quickly, we preferred using flowers in full color bud; Cutting flowers at proper time and conditioning is important; A little short, but that may change in year two?

Notable insects/diseases: None (5); The blooms were not in a rounded crown as expected, but looked more like ratty side shoots, I suspect insect damage took out the center of the inflorescence, I cut hundreds of stems of the native *Eupatorium* that don’t have this problem; Insects flocked to open flowers and rendered unattractive; There were corn rootworm beetles all up in the flowers.

Additional comments: I would say that it would take the place of a statice-type filler or baby’s breath....but way more specialty...which makes a small grower unique and different; ‘Gateway’ is very similar just taller; Grew with great vigor; We liked this so much that I purchased another flat in August, we did lose some of this second planting due to dry weather, it seems to prefer moisture upon establish-



Filipendula ‘Venusta’

ment, but was extremely drought tolerant after establishment; Based on the first year, the native wildflower is superior to ‘Baby Joe’, there seemed to be insect damage to the inflorescence that was not seen on the native stand on our property, perhaps the second season will yield better results, found this color bloom difficult to work into my more typical bright pallet, it did hold for a couple weeks in the cooler, however, the deer pruning actually stimulated branching and more usable stems, the un-chewed made rather large heads; This cultivar has good potential, I am very interested to see how it will do next year; Again I really did not harvest any in hopes of having a stronger plant next year.

Filipendula ‘Venusta’

Good qualities: Good vigor, tall stem; Nice fluffy pink flower in the middle of summer, will be especially good for events and weddings; Vigorous growth, nice color and texture; We preferred the flowers after they have completed blooming and buds were bronze in color; Could probably be harvested in different stages, it remained attractive after flowering. Editor’s note: See also Postharvest article in this issue.

Problems: We lost all these late in the season due to extreme drought (we lost some established perennials this season due to the dry weather), I am hoping they went dormant and will return in spring; Not a main focal flower from a design standpoint, amorphous flower form; Flowers

shattered very easily after stems were cut; The tiny little petals shatter and fall like snow, they can become very messy in short order, perhaps there is a postharvest treatment, or better stage of harvest that will make them more usable, they may be best suited for event work rather than general retail sale; Flowers shattered, we cut in full colored bud, partial flower/partial bud, full flower, and after flowering, the colored bud stage wilted quickly and had troubles rehydrating, any stage of flower, shattered, we finally tried the “pods” and were happiest with those.

Notable insects/diseases: None (2); Japanese beetles liked to hang out on the flowers, but they didn’t seem to do much damage.

Additional comments: The flower shape and color reminded me of astilbe (2), which is pretty hard to grow here; Similar to spirea; I love filipendula and it is very much desired and loved at every level of the floral industry, I will be excited to see this one bloom; Vigorous, I expect many more stems once established; Another one I am very interested to see next year; Not enough stems to make much of an impression; It is worth further experimentation to see if the petal drop can be reduced, because the color, and texture of the flower is lovely, and they seem quite vigorous; I did not harvest any stems since a first-year harvest frequently leads to failure the next year.

Heucherella ‘Art Nouveau’

Good qualities: Did survive our very dry summer but barely!, no marketable stems or leaves, leaves are pretty; Very vigorous, and established quickly, seems to prefer part shade.

Problems: Low vigor overall, poor survival in sunny areas, better in shade area; These little plants came in looking very sad, I was able to get 2 to make it through the season and I hope they make it through the winter, we had a very hot and dry summer; May not be vigorous enough for production, needs a ton of water; Plants grew slowly; This plant seems to be primarily a foliage plant, remains to

Stokesia ‘Mel’s Blue’ had a lovely flower and an unusual color for the middle of summer.

be seen if it produces marketable flowers; These plants remained very small through the season.

Notable insects/diseases: None.

Additional comments: We’ve tried many other heucheras/heucherellas and have had only limited success, we prefer more vigorous perennials with more usable stem length; I am a little worried I have them in too much shade; 1st year trial not an accurate evaluation of this plant, potential to use leaves as filler if they get the advertised height of 16-18 inches, no flowers produced in first year, leaf stems not long enough to use as a cut as yet; All plants were alive when delivered, but not in good shape, 71% died by the end of the summer, our plants did not flower this year; I cut only a few leaves off for trial, and they held well. I wanted to keep most on the plants to build strength for next season, they may be a useful foliage for sale to florists, they had a similar vase life of heucheras, they seem to be tough, I saw some sit on the clearance rack at the local Tractor Supply for a few months this summer, they still looked surprisingly good despite the abuse.

Physostegia ‘Pink Manners’

Good qualities: Beautiful shiny dark leaves, clean strong pink flowers, strong stems, good appearance; Tolerated very dry summer well; Grows well in partial shade, a nice spike flower in the middle of summer, pollinators love it; Late-blooming vigorous plant.

Problems: None worth noting; Was not a color or form that appeals to us, flowers bloomed low in plant (open from bot-

tom of cluster) and did not look great in bouquets; Weak color; Flowers did not develop uniformly, I didn’t cut any to help the plant develop strength, but none looked worth cutting.

Notable insects/diseases: None (3). The sporadic and contorted flowering may have been the result of unseen insect damage. Our primary pest is Tarnished Plant Bug, but I can’t confirm they were the issues.

Additional comments: Out of all the plants in this trial, during the first year, this is the most promising, I will expect more stem length in subsequent years; A vigorous plant but not substantial enough flower for our style; Excellent potential for next year, once the plants are established.

Stokesia ‘Mel’s Blue’

Good qualities: Nice blue color (4); Good vase life, attractive flower shape; Loved dry weather, great promise to be vigorous and taller as it establishes next year; Hardy plant requiring little attention, did well in a pretty brutal summer here, plants that did not flower had good basal growth and could flower well next year; Doesn’t stop blooming; Cute.

Problems: Too short (3) this year; Not an impressive flower, inside browns quickly, plants got competition from weeds, but we preferred ‘Matsumoto’ asters over this plant; Unusable; So many flowers on a stem, hard to use in small bunches, have to decide to harvest stem either early before all flowers open, or late after some have passed their peak; We did not harvest any stems.

Notable insects/diseases: None (4).

Additional comments: Flower looks like scabiosa; In the vase, the flowers closed every evening and opened up again in the morning; One of our two favorites of the trial (also *Eupatorium*), great in small, low arrangements, we are very hopeful for this next year!; A lovely flower and an unusual color for the middle of summer; They bloomed too short to be of much use this season, but I look forward to their second year.



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Trial Results for Year 1 of perennial cultivars. First row of data for each cultivar is the average and the second row is the range of responses. Note when only one response is listed in the range line, several trialers responded and all gave the same rating.

Species	Cultivar	Plants flowering (%)	Yield (stems/plant)	Stem length (inches)	Ratings ¹		
					Market appreciation	Ease of cultivation	Grow again
<i>Astrantia</i>	Roma	32 0-100	5.0 4-6	9 4-13	2.3 1-4	3.3 1-5	2.7 1-4
<i>Eryngium</i>	Big Blue	72 50-80	- -	- -	1.0 1	2.0 1-3	4.0 3-5
<i>Eupatorium</i>	Baby Joe	88 0-100	3.2 1-7	23 12-36	3.3 2-5	4.6 4-5	3.5 2-5
<i>Filipendula</i>	Venusta	54 0-100	1.3 1-2	26 10-36	2.3 1-4	3.9 1-5	2.9 1-4
<i>Heucherella</i>	Art Nouveau	- -	- -	- -	1.0 1	3.2 2-5	1.8 1-3
<i>Physostegia</i>	Pink Manners	72 0-100	2.7 1-4	17 12-24	3.0 2-4	4.6 4-5	3.3 2-4
<i>Stokesia</i>	Mel's Blue	78 0-100	2.7 1-5	13 10-18	3.2 1-4	4.3 3-5	3.9 1-5

¹1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the best. Market ratings are based on sales to wholesalers, retailers or final consumers.