Winning Plant Combination: Some Like it Hot!

Tonya Banbury

Some like it hot! No, not the wonderful Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon movie of 1959. Almost 50 years later, I’m talking about a plant combination that can take the heat. This trio of stars includes Hibiscus ‘Copper King’, Canna ‘Pink Sunburst’ and Hypericum ‘Brigadoon’.

In my movie, the part of Marilyn Monroe will be played by Canna ‘Pink Sunburst’, the centerpiece of the combo (pictured left). Canna lilies have become popular again in today’s landscape, owing largely to new cultivars that have a bold, tropical appeal. And in our zone 7, cold hardiness is not an issue.

Most of the new hybrids are big, but ‘Pink Sunburst’ is a genetic dwarf, less than 3 feet tall, making her the perfect choice for small gardens. She’s robust and quickly widens into a visual statement of variegated foliage. The typically large leaf is striped reddish pink, green and gold, and is topped by a soft peachy pink flower. If she has a weakness, it’s the dreaded leaf roller. Removing the foliage before winter has sometimes helped. Give this gal plenty of the sun she craves. Her beauty and drought tolerance ensure her a lasting place in my garden.

Every star needs a good supporting cast and in the plant world that would mean colors and shapes that harmonize and reflect. Since ‘Pink Sunburst’ is short, she’s enhanced by the height of Hibiscus ‘Copper King’ as well as the coppery colored foliage. Allan Armitage says many modern hibiscus cultivars are likely hybrids of the species moscheutos or common rose mallow, and are excellent perennials for the southern garden.

‘Copper King’ will grow to about 5 feet, but will be slow to emerge from his winter sleep, so be patient. Like the canna, basking in a full day of sun is his preference and he doesn’t whine when it gets dry. In late summer, he’ll be topped by large flat soft pink flowers. Like most hibiscus cultivars, ‘Copper King’ performs well in zones 5-10.

Our last supporting cast member in this trio is Hypericum androsaenum ‘Brigadoon’. Hypericum, commonly known as St. John’s Wort, but not the medicinal variety, is a good garden plant for zones 5-7. That means we’re right on the edge of being too hot and humid for this guy in Piedmont North Carolina. But my relationship with ‘Brigadoon’ has been a pleasant surprise because he’s gold and seems to stand up to the heat better than the species. We’re also talking about a spreading ground cover habit, so he grows at the feet of ‘Pink Sunburst’ and reflects back that golden color in her leaf. Truly, he is 6-8 inches tall at most, and though lacking flowers and berries, his foliage color is enough to make him a complete package. ‘Brigadoon’ is also evergreen, but you’ll need to rid him of some tattered foliage once winter has past.

The three perennials mentioned above are stalwarts in the hot Southern garden. But what if you’re looking for less showy companions for Canna ‘Pink Sunburst’? In recent years another player, the Red Castor Bean, Ricinus communis, rubrum, a native of tropical Africa, has stepped onto the stage. Though castor bean is a tender annual, he’s been reseeding in my garden since his introduction. His large pointed palmate leaves support the tropical theme of this composition and his large stature provides the height of Hibiscus ‘Copper King’ without the additional ornament of flowers. Be aware that castor bean is a poisonous plant, and be vigilant if small children frequent your garden.

Also nearby is a dwarf thread-leaf Chamaecyparis pisifera ‘Filifera Aurea’, which understudies well for ‘Brigadoon’ Hypericum, and in fact, adds a welcomed texture change.

No matter whom you choose for this ensemble, we all appreciate good performers on stage and in the garden. Drought tolerant sun loving plants get top billing in an area of my garden that is brutal in the summer. For an award winning garden, plan carefully and choose plants that are right for the hot conditions of summer.  

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