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Entertainment & Life

Gardening for the Record: Imagine a calorie-free chocolate Valentine for your gardening sweetheart

By Lucy Fry

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Looking for a Valentine gift for that special someone who already has a rose garden and who avoids calorie-loaded chocolates?

How about a Valentine card describing a whimsical chocolate garden and include a few seeds or starter plants that smell like chocolate, look like chocolate or have chocolate names? Impossible? Not at all. In fact, there are many plant options, both annuals and perennials, that will thrive in the Arkansas River valley.

But first, let's look at why we celebrate Valentine's Day with gifts of flowers, cards and chocolates. Many stories and legends date back to the Middle Ages.

One story is about the holiday's namesake. Emperor Claudius decreed that single men made better soldiers and prohibited marriage of these men. A priest named Valentine defied the emperor and continued to perform marriages in secret. He was sentenced to death on Feb. 14. While in jail, Valentine fell in love with his jailer's daughter and sent her a letter, signed "From Your Valentine." And that expression is still used today.

Another fantasy deals with the Roman boy god of desire, Cupid, son of Venus, the goddess of love. Cupid was a mischievous boy who loved to send arrows into his victims, making them fall in love.

The popularity of Valentine bouquets began in the 17th century when Sweden's King Charles II discovered a Persian art form called the language of flowers — an expressionist art that focused on the ability to communicate by using flowers to pass on non-verbal messages. Each flower had its own specific meaning.

And although chocolate dates back to Latin America where cacao trees grew wild, the gift of chocolates became the vogue in early 1600s Europe when chocolate houses began to rival coffee houses as social gathering spots. And thanks to chocolate visionaries Richard Cadbury and Milton Hershey, chocolates on Valentine's Day are as popular as flowers.



A chocolate Valentine without the calories comes with several choices of flower seeds promising chocolate fragrances, chocolate colors or chocolate names. These are among a variety of seeds found at Neumeier's Nursery. [PHOTO SUBMITTED BY PAT ROBBINS, MASTER GARDENER]



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In fact, this column's inspiration for a chocolate garden comes from the Botanical Interests catalog. Co-founders Curtis and Judy Seaborn defined the garden "as an epicenter of senses — enchanting sights, intriguing scents, wonderful textures, whimsical sounds and exciting tastes."

A chocolate garden creatively uses plants that emit a chocolate scent or have foliage or blooms in dark, rich color tones in shades of brown, bronze, burgundy, maroon or deep purple to almost black.

Some are heirlooms and some are so new they are in the 2018 catalogs arriving daily in our mailboxes. One new plant is Mint Cocoa lisianthus. According to Burpee, the flowers of this green-brown color combo "give an almost Victorian feel, but is definitely Instagram-ready."

Another new introduction is Chocolate and Cream love-in-a-mist that has pure white petals with contrasting dark cocoa-colored stamens and seedpods that float above wispy foliage.

Among plants with a chocolate fragrance that can grow in the region are: Chocolate cosmos that also has chocolate-colored flowers; Chocolate vine, a climber with purple or white blooms; Chocolate soldier columbine that also has chocolate-purple and green blooms; chocolate scented geranium; and several orchids, including Sharry Baby and Encyclia Phoenicea.

Boasting brown foliage are Milk chocolate sedge, Chocolate ruffles coralbells, Dark chocolate coleus, Chocolate mint coleus, Chocolate Joe Pye weed, Boston cherries, Chocolate Rex begonia, Chocolate chip ajuga and Summer chocolate mimosa.

Noted for chocolate-colored flowers are Hot cocoa rose (ruffled smoky chocolate-orange), Sweet hot chocolate daylily (mahogany-purple), Chocolate sunflower (golden-brown petals), Velour frosted chocolate viola (rich carmel-chocolate), Colorburst chocolate calibrachoa (burgundy blushed with brown) and Chocolate morning glory (blooms described as "dusty rose — about as close to chocolate as you can get)."

And, there is even one for the vegetable gardener: Chocolate cherry tomato, described as deep brick red with chocolate shading. And for the fruit lover, check out Chocolate persimmon, which boasts of sweet and tasty, cocoa tinted flesh and lime green leaves in spring, which darken to emerald and flush to a brilliant orange in fall.

What accent colors work best with these delicious plants in the garden? Jody Neumeier of Neumeier's Nursery suggests yellow, blue, pink and orange.

Chocolate garden companion suggestions from the University of California Extension Service website (ucanr.edu) include Dolce crème brulee coralbells, wine cups poppy mallow, Rustic organic coleus, Lime rickey coralbells, yellow Knockout rose and Silky fleece lamb's ear.

Next week, the topic will be: the mystique of the orchid.

Lucy Fry of Fort Smith is a level 4 Master Gardener and writes the area Master Gardener newsletter. Her column, Gardening for the Record, runs weekly in the Times Record. Send questions to gardeningsfortherecord@gmail.com.