

## Black Petunias



One of the new bi-colored black petunias, 'Phantom'.

Black petunias have been promoted for the last couple of years as the latest new and hot thing for consumers to add to their gardens. A fair amount of media interest surrounded these unique varieties, as they were featured in various garden-related publications and garnered some awards. But do these plants live up to the hype? I guess it depends – if you're a Goth gardener or are just looking for an unusual plant as a quirky accent these probably fit the bill. They certainly can be considered a winner in terms of innovative breeding, but it's likely these are just a novelty and the fad will fade as some other gardening trend is promoted. Many people bought these initially out of curiosity, but will they keep a permanent place in the landscape?

The first black petunia was developed by Ball FloraPlant. It took flower breeder Jianping Ren four years to create the dully-named cultivar 'Balpevec' using traditional breeding techniques. This plant is available from W. Atlee Burpee & Co. marketed exclusively as 'Black Cat' (billed as "the world's only black petunia"). It is also sold as 'Black Velvet' by a number of suppliers. As the name suggests, it has a velvety texture and appears as a true black, even though it is actually a very, dark purple. The plants are relatively small and mounding instead of trailing, getting only 8-12" across. They tend to have a tightly branched growth habit at first, but can get scraggly later in the season, especially if not fertilized well.



'Black Velvet' petunia flowers.



'Phantom' petunia flowers.

Black Velvet's companions 'Phantom' and 'Pinstripe' were also developed by Ball. 'Phantom' is a near-black flower with an eye-catching chartreuse-yellow star pattern. 'Pinstripe' has a similar pattern on dark petals, with thinner white or pink bands that gradate into purple. These flowers are quite striking, and seem



'Phantom' petunia flowers.

to show up better in the garden with their bi-colored petals than the solid black ones. Last year Ball introduced 'Black Cherry', a dark maroon the color of really ripe cherries, with a shimmer to the petals in the sun.

Supposedly black goes with everything and some gardeners will agree with that. But others find the dark color difficult to work with. It certainly doesn't show up from a distance and completely disappears when the light dims. They can look dull in a large planting, so are best used as an accent. They are great in mixed containers where they can be viewed up close and in contrast to other, brighter flowers. The solid black petunias are quite dramatic and sophisticated-looking when combined with white flowers, such as nemesia, bacopa, or 'Diamond Frost' euphorbia. They also look good combined with plants with silver foliage, such as dusty miller. 'Phantom' combines nicely with yellow



A mass of 'Pinstripe' petunias.



'Phantom' petunia contrasts with golden hakone grass (foreground) and other petunias in a mixed planting.

flowers or foliage, such yellow calibrachoa, lantana or feathery Bidens, while 'Pinstripe' mixes better with plants in the pink to purple range. It mixes well with 'Firework' fountain grass, pastel alyssum, or pale pink petunias. But color combinations in the garden are subjective, and everyone has their individual preferences. If these combos don't strike your fancy, grow some late in the season in an orange pot and bring indoors as a Halloween decoration!

These plants generally are vigorous, but many reports indicate they have non-uniform growth and low to moderate flowering that leaves gaps with a lot of the foliage visible. And depending on the weather and sun exposure, the blossoms may look more purple than black, especially on the back side of the petals. The all black varieties may revert to show some yellow stripes when stressed by heat or drought. And in the garden the plants may not be as floriferous as in the promotional pictures.

There are no glowing reports on the performance of these petunias in plant trials or even anecdotal reports by blogging gardeners after the initial flurry of

media attention in 2011 and 2012. The plants did respectably in annual plant trials at Michigan State University (2010), Ohio State University (2010) and Penn State University (2011 and 2012), all scoring 3.5 or better [on a scale of 1-5, with 5 = Excellent (Outstanding); 4 = Good (Nice display); 3 = Fair (Average, Moderate)]. Both 'Black Velvet' and 'Pinstripe' receiving an overall average rating of 4.25, although 'Black Velvet' generally had consistently higher rankings compared to the others in the same trials. 'Phantom' only managed a 4.0, dragged down by



A mass of 'Black Velvet' petunias showing many gaps exposing the foliage.

low rakings at Penn State in 2012 when the plants suffered foliar necrosis and chlorosis and therefore exhibited very low flower density. But even though these cultivars were considered “good” in most trials, there are many other much better petunia cultivars out there. ‘Black Velvet’ and ‘Phantom’ were both in the lower ¼ of all petunias trialed at Penn State (‘Pinstripe’ was not included in those trials), although ‘Black Velvet’ did make up into the top half (barely) in 2012. None made it into the “best of” group in any of the many trials with results available on the web.

Personally, I think the bi-colors are the most interesting in containers or the landscape, mainly because the bright portion of them shows up more than the black! What do you think?

– *Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison*

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