

2021 ASCFG Perennial Trial Report

John Dole and Judy Laushman

Photo Renee Clayton

In the second year of the 2020 Perennial Trial, two of the three top-scoring cultivars were kniphofias, also known as red-hot poker. With long, strong spikes and bright colors, these South African natives make an impact in bouquets and designs. *Kniphofia* 'Lucky Lemon' produced 25 stems per plant, and *Kniphofia* 'Flashpoint' about 14 stems/plant. For both, the stems were 18-24 inches long. In 2021, stems were longer and there were about double the number of the first year. For those new to kniphofias, be aware that the lower florets turn brown as they age, making it tricky to harvest, as you need the spikes to be well colored, but before the lower florets turn brown. A quick shake of stems while harvesting can dislodge some of the brown ones.

The final top three-scoring cultivar was *Phlox* 'Fashionably Early Crystal', lauded for its productivity, 16 stems per plant, and long stems, 18-30 inches. One Trialer commented, "I can't rave enough about this plant! It's an addictive flower to have if you're a farmer-florist doing event work or if you're selling to florists who do weddings." See the comments section for more accolades.

Penstemon 'Onyx and Pearls' did well with an average of 14 flowering stems per plant that ranged from 15 to 24 inches long. One distinctive advantage is that the seed capsules are also attractive, along with the dark foliage: "And if you miss the flowers, the dark seed heads are also beautiful, and dry well, for great texture material."

As anyone growing baptisias will tell you, they can take a while to get rolling. Of the four respondents, three had 'Plum Rosy' plants that flowered and one was still waiting. For those with flowering plants, it was clearly a winner. One Trialer commented, "Gosh, the color is spectacular! Also, I am so excited about the foliage, too! It's a great shade of blue-green, and more upright/rigid than some of my (many) other baptisia varieties."

Based on the combined ratings score (market appreciation + repeat again + ease of cultivation), the following top-ranked cultivars will be nominated for the ASCFG Cut Flower of the Year: *Kniphofia* 'Lucky Lemon', *Kniphofia* 'Flashpoint', and *Phlox* 'Fashionably Early Crystal'.

Interpreting the trial results: The numbers reported are averages of all the respondents, and many factors will affect the success of any cultivar. Our participants grow and harvest 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 variety sounds interesting, but did not appear to do well, try it anyway—it may work well for you.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to each of the four evaluators who returned their trial reports! We very much appreciate the time it takes to participate in the trials. We want to especially thank **Jennie Love** from Love ‘n Fresh Flowers for being the first Trialer to return evaluations. Thank you to Walters Gardens for providing the plant materials. 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.

Summary of Comments. The number in the parentheses is the number of Trialers who made the same comment. Comments from different individuals are separated by a “;”. Note: many respondents did not make specific comments on each cultivar, and in a few cases, comments have been shortened because of limited space.

Photos: This year Rachael Ackerman, Renee Clayton, and Jennie Love sent several wonderful photos—thank you!

Participating Company

Walters Gardens
Zeeland, Michigan
www.WaltersGardens.com

Participating Trialers

Renee Clayton
Wild Scallions Farm
Timberlake, NC
Zone 7

Michelle Elston
Roots Cut Flower Farm
Carlisle, PA
Zone 6b

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NC State University
Raleigh, NC
Zone 7b

Jennie Love
Love ‘n Fresh Flowers
Philadelphia, PA
Zone 7

Year 2 Results

Achillea ‘Firefly Diamond’

Good Qualities: Robust stems, no need to stake or support plants (3).

Problems: None; Large, ivory-colored flower heads are difficult to use in arrangements and the color is simply rather blah.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Postharvest Recommendations: 10-day vase life.

Achillea ‘Peter Cottontail’

Good Qualities: Bushy, full stems bulk up a bouquet nicely; Nice button form.

Problems: Died out after seemingly getting really well established the first year and even flowering some towards the end of last season, it’s a bummer because I really did think it had a lot of potential, not sure if it’s not winter hardy in Zone 7? can’t imagine that it’s not, we had a lot of snow this past winter, which is unusual for us, these were planted in a raised bed so drainage was not the issue; Feverfew blooms at the same time! and is way more productive and vigorous.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: I feel like it’s similar to ‘The Pearl’; Looks more like a baby’s breath than a yarrow.

Postharvest Recommendations: 7-day vase life.



‘Sassy Summer Lemon’

Photo Jennie Love

Comments: A useful flower to have around, but not terribly productive; Dried fairly well.

Achillea ‘Sassy Summer Lemon’

Good Qualities: Eye-catching shade of yellow (3), fairly popular for events; It was SO productive!, flowers held well on the plant so we could pick them as needed over a couple weeks, were planted right next to the ‘Peter Cottontail’, which nearly all died out, but this cultivar made it through the rough winter like a champ; Small- to medium-sized flower heads are easy to design with and plants are very productive.

Problems: Not as vigorous or productive as ‘Moonshine’.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: ‘Coronation Gold’ is really similar I feel, but I like the yellow of this one more for some reason, the shading difference is subtle, but it does make a difference when mixing this bloom with other tones; ‘Moonshine’, None.

Postharvest Recommendations: 5-10 day vase life.

Comments: A great May-blooming perennial!; Sunny disposition and easy to grow!

Astilbe ‘Purple Candles’

Good Qualities: It’s the first astilbe cultivar I’ve gotten to be happy at my farm (I’ve tried a lot), I’m not sure if that’s an attribute of the cultivar or if I finally picked a good spot for them (growing on the north/shaded side of my hoop house where it gets a lot of moisture as well as protection in the winter), in any case, it seems like a really tough plant.

Problems: Not sure I’m loving the color, as a designer, I found it hard to figure out what to mix this shade of purple-red with, especially at that time of the season, the color is on the cooler side, which meant it didn’t play well with warm shades, but now that I know I will have this in my mix of spring blooms, I’ll plant more cool-toned flowers to pair with it, not a hard problem to solve.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: There are a lot of red astilbe that look pretty similar to this one.



Photo Renee Clayton



Photo Jennie Love

Postharvest Recommendations: Only good for event work as they started to look dirty/less lovely after 3-4 days in the vase, held really well in the cooler, though, and I could keep them for weddings for 2 weeks after cutting.

Comments: It's a keeper!

Baptisia 'Plum Rosy'

Good Qualities: Nice lavender/dusty purple color, unsure about foliage quality; Great muted rosy color equally good for events or farmers' market, strong robust plant growth; Gosh, the color is spectacular! also, I am so excited about the foliage too! it's a great shade of blue-green and more upright/rigid than some of my (many) other baptisia varieties, I think this cultivar is going to be a standout!!! eager for it to hit its stride in another year or two.

Problems: Need a few more years for more information; None.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None (2).

Similar Cultivars: I grow a lot of baptisia and I haven't seen one quite this color before. It's unique.

Postharvest Recommendations: 10 day-vase life.

Comments: Generally takes us a few years to determine best baptisias since they are so slow to establish, we did appreciate the unique bloom color of this one; Give me 100 more!

Kniphofia 'Lucky Lemons'

Good Qualities: Robust plant growth and extremely productive! Flowers are a pale creamy yellow, quite popular now.

Problems: Typical lower floret browning issue.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: None.

Postharvest Recommendations: Use a holding solution.

Comments: The productivity and popularity of these plants just kept surprising



Photo Rachael Ackerman



Photo John Dole

me! This trial really taught me to appreciate kniphofia, and they provide a great spike shape in the middle of summer when you really need one again.

Kniphofia PYROMANIA 'Flashpoint'

Good Qualities: Tall flowers, easy to harvest, robust plant growth.

Problems: Bottom flowers on stem tended to discolor if not harvested promptly.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: Very similar in color and growth to 'Lucky Lemons' kniphofia.

Comments: I think this variety will be just as productive as 'Lucky Lemons' next year, the two are very similar, for being a pastel color, these flowers developed quite a following at the farmers' market (for the month they bloomed anyway).



'Onyx and Pearls'

Photo Jennie Love

Penstemon 'Onyx and Pearls'

Good Qualities: Flowers have a great wildflower look, attract pollinators and beneficials, and the foliage is beautiful year round, seed heads can also be harvested and sold; Interesting light/dark contrast of petals and sepals and stems, nice for "moody" spring design work, nice textural plant, seems to be very drought tolerant and vigorous; I feel like this beauty is just getting started! It's a robust and elegant plant that smothers out any weeds in the bed so that's a delight, the flowers are a lovely and delicate/sophisticated touch in designs, especially for wedding work, stems are rigid and straight, the seed heads are super cool too if you can manage to not cut all the flowers.

Problems: Some support is beneficial, spent flowers sometimes need to be combed off stem; Short bloom window, we don't have much demand for very dainty flowers (or patience in harvesting them!!); None.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: Nope, seems really unique.

Postharvest Recommendations: 4-5 days.

Comments: This is a great cut flower! it doesn't have a long harvest window, but a wealth of stems for two weeks, and if you miss the flowers, the dark seed heads are also beautiful, and dry well, for great texture material; I adore this plant and hope lots of other flower farmers give it a try, too!

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Phlox LUMINARY 'Opalescence'

Good Qualities: Lovely pale pink flower.

Problems: Plants need extra care, mulching, and weeding.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Comments: Come bloom time, I only had two surviving plants of this variety! They were lovely, but the plants are clearly not thriving.

Phlox 'Fashionably Early Crystal'

Good Qualities: Bloomed very early (for Mother's Day here!), also had a very decent second round of side stems a month later; I can't rave enough about this plant! As a wedding designer, it is the bomb for centerpieces—blossoms just when there's that pesky void in the June line-up of "bigger" flowers that are needed to fill out a centerpiece, the color is perfect, the stems sturdy, the plants re-flushed! I got an amazing second cutting in midsummer and there's a spotty third flush happening right now in late summer but I won't cut that as I don't want to deplete the plants, but it's really impressive how much they bloom.

Problems: None.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: Very similar to a white sweet William; There are other white phlox, but none that bloom this early, and that's the real reason to grow this cultivar over others.

Postharvest Recommendations: Ten-day vase life.



'Fashionably Early Crystal'

Photo Renee Clayton



'Glamour Girl'

Photo John Dole

Comments: Great cut flower at a good time on tall strong stems; I loved this one so much that I bought 50 more from Walter's and I'll probably buy another 50 soon, it's an addictive flower to have if you're a farmer-florist doing event work or if you're selling to florist who do weddings.

Phlox 'Glamour Girl'

Good Qualities: Similar to 'Early Crystal', this phlox is a keeper and puts out multiple flushes in the season, which is wonderful, really vibrant color! Nothing else quite like it out in the field, gets a lot of attention from farm visitors; Good coral color which is popular right now; Great warm pink flower color, robust stems.

Problems: I reallllly like this plant and the color, but it's been almost impossible to mix with any other colors because it is so darn vibrant, the only color it goes really well with is orange, but unfortunately it blooms at a time of year when there really isn't much orange in my fields, wish it came earlier to be with orange tulips or later to be with orange zinnias; We dislike phlox in general for our humid climate, also, too thirsty/intolerant of dry conditions, petal drop soon after harvest, like most phlox; Not real robust plants, need extra care, mulching and weeding.

Notable Insects and Diseases: None.

Similar Cultivars: None.

Postharvest Recommendations: 3-4 day vase life.

Comments: If you and your customers like bold-in-your-face-bright, this is an excellent flower to grow!

Table 1. Year two results for plants received 2020. The 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 shown in the range line, all respondents gave the same rating.

Species Cultivar	Plant survival from previous year (%)	Plants flowering (%)	Yield (stems/ plant)	Stem length (in.) ¹	Market appreciation rating ²	Ease of cultivation rating ²	Grow again rating ²
Achillea Firefly Diamond	100 100	100 100	13.3 8-20	16.5 15-18	3.5 3-4	5.0 5	4.0 3-5
Achillea Peter Cottontail	75 0-100	100 100	6.5 5-8	14.0 12-16	3.5 3-4	3.3 1-5	1.7 1-3
Achillea Sassy Summer Lemon	100 100	100 100	17.3 5-37	16.3 15-18	3.7 2-5	5.0 5	3.3 1-5
Astilbe Purple Candles	100 100	100 100	9.0 9	15.0 15	3.5 3-4	4.5 4-5	3.5 3-4
Baptisia Plum Rosy	100 100	88 50-100	3.5 1-6	18.0 12-24	4.7 4-5	4.3 3-5	4.3 3-5
Kniphofia Lucky Lemons	100 100	100 100	25.0 25	21.0 21	4.5 4-5	5.0 5	4.5 4-5
Kniphofia PYROMANIA Flashpoint	100 100	100 100	13.8 5-20	21.0 18-24	4.5 4-5	4.5 4-5	4.5 4-5
Penstemon Onyx and Pearls	100 100	100 100	7.5 5-10	24.0 24	4.7 4-5	4.7 4-5	4.0 2-5
Phlox Fashionably Early Crystal	100 100	100 100	16.0 12-20	21.0 18-30	5.0 5	4.5 4-5	5.0 5
Phlox Glamour Girl	73 40-100	100 100	5.2 4-9	16.8 12-26	3.3 2-4	3.0 1-5	3.0 1-4
Phlox LUMINARY Opalescence	75 50-100	100 100	4.0 4	18.0 18	4.5 4-5	4.0 3-5	4.0 3-5

¹Data shown are from the respondents who harvested stems. Some Trialers may have not harvested stems because they were too short. The stems, not the Trialers.

²1 to 5 scale with 5 being the best; market appreciation ratings are based on sales to wholesalers, retailers, and/or final consumers.