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Heucheras – their cultivation and use

Gareth Batts

H. americana 'Harry Hay'

Heucheras, commonly called Coral Bells, are a must for any keen horticulturist's garden. Evergreen or semi-evergreen herbaceous perennials, they are useful as a foil to other plants and can brighten up the garden on gloomy winter days. A range of foliage colours is available, from golden

yellow (*Heuchera* 'Electra'), red/brown (*H.* 'Cherry Cola') through to black (*H.* 'Black Taffeta'). Heucheras are native to North America and were first introduced to the UK in 1882. They belong to the *Saxifragaceae* family, which includes many popular plants from the delicate alpine *Saxifraga nivalis* to large-leaved bergenias.

Cultivation

Heucheras grow best in moist, well-drained soil; they don't tolerate long periods of drought or being waterlogged. They grow well in both partial shade and full sun. They can also be grown in full shade if the soil is kept moist, and not allowed to dry out.

Flowers provide muted colour



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H. villosa 'Autumn Bride'



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H. 'Rachel'



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H. 'Brownfinch'

A wide range of foliage colour

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H. 'Brownfinch'

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H. 'Venus'

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H. Crème Brûlée

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H. 'Amber Waves'

Heucheras can also be grown in containers. I make sure that the container is wide enough for the plant to spread out, so I get a few years out of the display before it outgrows the pot. Again, make sure the

soil is free draining and kept moist.

Propagation is straightforward, either with seed or by division. I prefer division as the new plants will be true to type, without

the risk of reversion. When I'm buying plants I always look for good deals. It's worth looking out for heucheras on the bargain stand as they are easy to divide and, within a few months, you can have a number of smaller plants grown from your original stock plant. I have found that a 1L pot of *Heuchera* can make on average 3 divisions producing three healthy plants for the garden within a season.

The best time to divide heucheras is early spring. I tend to do this in March, just before the plant starts to put on growth. It's not advisable to divide the plants in the summer because water loss is much more rapid when they are producing flowers and new leaves, coupled with increased temperatures and less rain. The latest I would advise you to divide them would be early May, because it is still cool enough at night to slow down water loss, giving the plant a fighting chance to survive.

Whether buying heucheras or growing them at home it is worth looking out for pests. Unfortunately heucheras are susceptible to vine weevils: the adult weevil eats the leaves, but this isn't usually as damaging to the plant as the white grubs which eat the roots and the base of the plant, causing it to die. Often the first sign of vine weevils is the leaves beginning to wilt and then starting to rot. To check for vine weevils before you buy, gently lift the plant out of the pot to look for any grubs in the soil, and examine the

base of the plant and the leaves for any damage; if there are no signs of grubs or damage it is likely the plant will thrive.

If you suspect vine weevil is attacking the heucheras in your garden you could consider using a biological control – nematodes. Follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully regarding the necessary temperature, and apply the solution before the grubs become too big for the microscopic parasite to work best.

Use in garden design

It is hard to find a herbaceous border that has not at least one cultivar of *Heuchera* within it. With their heart-shaped lobed leaves, available in a wide variety of colours, it is hard to resist them. They are grown primarily for their foliage as, compared to their leaves, the flowers are generally small and pale in colour. The boldness of the leaf colour outshines the flowers, however with the vertical flower-spikes heucheras make a two-tier contribution to the structure of the border.

Over the last few years I've seen in large parks and gardens a shift from the use of winter/summer temporary bedding plants to more permanent structural plants. Rather than the traditional violas, petunias, wallflowers, salvias and marigolds, which can be expensive to buy or grow and to maintain, they are slowly changing over to perennial, all-year-round planting, which of course includes heucheras.

In most areas of the southern and south-eastern UK they can give instant and continuous colour, and when dead-headed correctly they can flower a number of times throughout the year. In more northern parts of country they may die down in winter; however, I know places in North Wales and southern Scotland where in recent mild winters they are still in leaf in mid-December. They are hardy plants which can withstand typical British winters, and tolerate long spells of hot weather more effectively than other bedding plants. Also heucheras form clumps, making weed control somewhat easier than smaller seasonal bedding.

Another reason for many large gardens and local authorities changing over to more permanent bedding schemes is the cost of maintenance. Twice a year traditional bedding plants have to be dug up and disposed of, the bed dug over and all weeds removed. During summer months watering will be needed. With perennial planting, of which heucheras are a good example, the bed is dug once and as the plants mature they cover the soil, suppressing most weeds and minimising the loss of moisture in the soil.

For flower-power, a notable cultivar is *H.* 'Chocolate Ruffles' with pale pink flowers. The top surfaces of the leaves are purple, but the undersides are like dark chocolate in colour.



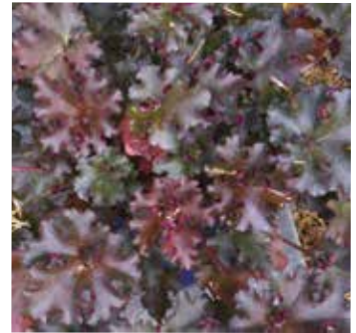
H. 'Chocolate Ruffles'

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H. 'Purple Petticoats'

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H. 'Crimson Curls'

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H. 'Mocha'

©Gareth Batts

Contrast and verticals in the border

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H. 'Silver Scrolls'

On a recent trip to RHS Wisley I noticed that heucheras seemed to have been used to entice you to the borders. The majority of the species I saw had purple foliage. In one border the dark purple leaves of *H.* 'Obsidian' contrasted well with the light green leaves of roses. In another border *H.* 'Mocha', which has a lighter purple leaf, was used to great advantage in front of a clump of rudbeckias.

The most recent RHS trials of heucheras ran from 1999 to 2001, assessing more than 200 cultivars from many countries, the majority hardy throughout the British Isles. Plants which were given the Award of Garden Merit include early-flowering *H.* 'Magic Wand', which has glossy green foliage and small magenta flowers, and *H.* 'Smokey Rose', which has a mixture of red, silver

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H. 'Blackberry Jam' with *Stipa tenuissima*

and green marbled foliage, the underside of its leaves reddish purple.

In summary, heucheras are a great garden plant which can add that extra bit of colour to both private and large public gardens during the darkest, dullest days of winter. They require little maintenance, are easy to propagate and an excellent alternative to annual bedding plants, so invaluable in the border. 🌸

Gareth Batts is a lecturer in horticulture at Hadlow College in Kent. He had worked in a number of garden centres and most recently as a gardener at a large private school before venturing into Further Education to grow on the next generation of gardeners.