

# Burnet

The best plant  
you're not  
growing

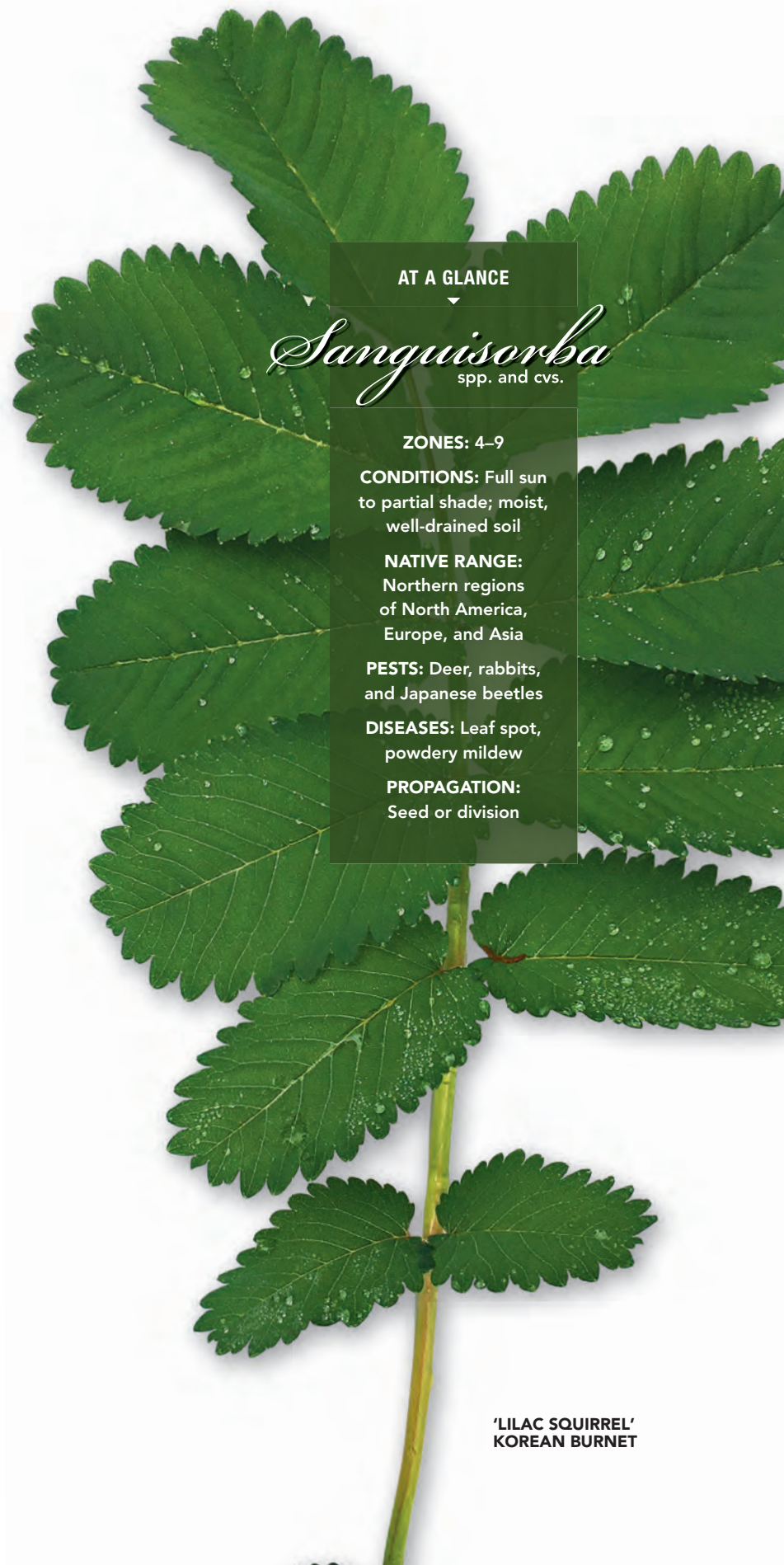
'ARNHEM' GREAT  
BURNET

These perennials are the ultimate choice for bridging the gap between summer and fall

BY RICHARD HAWKE

I have no recollection of burnets—native or cultivated—before my back-to-back encounters with great burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis*) in the South Korean countryside and on the grassy steppes of Siberia. The sight of its curious purple-red flowers wind-dancing on tall wiry stems stayed with me, kindling thoughts about burnets in the garden and wondering why they weren't more commonly grown—or even known—back home. It was an encounter with 'Tanna'—a seriously scaled-down version of great burnet—several years later that piqued my interest in doing a trial. The neat, dwarf mounds made the species seem almost unruly by comparison, and contrary to my usual dislike for miniaturizing tall perennials, I found 'Tanna' to be a charming exception.

But burnets still feel a bit obscure to me, which is not a commentary on their traits or garden value but has more to do with their lack of availability or visibility. My appreciation for burnets has grown steadily as more and more selections have come to market, but burnets are still less common here than in England and continental Europe. In 2019 at the Chicago Botanic Garden, we amassed a collection of burnets that was nearly four times larger than the original trial we conducted twenty years earlier. Gardeners' interest in burnets must be growing too, with new cultivars showing up in nursery catalogs every year. It's easy to understand why their popularity is increasing, especially when these whimsical plants burst into bloom in early summer, attracting pollinators aplenty. For me, great burnet's burgundy drumsticks are botanically intriguing, but Korean burnet's (*S. hakusanensis*) bushy squirrel tails wriggling in the breeze are simply fabulous. You can decide which one you like most; of course, nothing says you must limit yourself to just one. There were plenty of top performers in our trial.



AT A GLANCE

*Sanguisorba*  
spp. and cvs.

ZONES: 4–9

CONDITIONS: Full sun to partial shade; moist, well-drained soil

NATIVE RANGE: Northern regions of North America, Europe, and Asia

PESTS: Deer, rabbits, and Japanese beetles

DISEASES: Leaf spot, powdery mildew

PROPAGATION: Seed or division

'LILAC SQUIRREL'  
KOREAN BURNET

## TOP PERFORMERS TO TRY



'PINK TANNA' BURNET

'**Pink Tanna**' burnet (*S.* 'Pink Tanna') is a fantastic plant, but that is where its affinity to 'Tanna' ends. Pretty pink flowers with long pale-pink-to-whitish stamens have a soft, shaggy look. The vertical or slightly curved bottlebrushes—up to 1¼ inches when elongated—profusely cover the plants from midsummer to early fall. The flowers were always lighter in color than I expected and aged to a darker pink for what seemed like just a minute before turning brown. The narrow, pleated green leaves held on red stems were always healthy and lush. Japanese beetles occasionally marred this burnet's complexion but were never too troublesome. At 50 inches tall, 'Pink Tanna' was one of the tallest, sturdiest burnets, admirably holding itself upright all summer long.

The likeness to great burnet is clear, but '**Tanna**' burnet (*S.* 'Tanna') is more than just a dwarf version of the taller species. 'Tanna'—sometimes listed as a hybrid, sometimes not—has a compact, refined habit. It showed signs of its rhizomatous nature but never spread widely. The dark burgundy, egg-shaped flower heads look more like fruits than flowers; in fact, the rich color remains into midfall as seed is developing. In my mind, 'Tanna' has tiny flowers perfectly matched to its small ferny leaves and dwarf habit, but the reality is that its flowers were a bit larger than those of great burnet. As much as I like 'Tanna', some might still favor the full-size heft of great burnet a little more.

'**Little Angel**' dwarf burnet is cute. (There, I said it.) Diminutive in all aspects, 'Little Angel' (*S. officinalis* var. *microcephala* 'Little Angel') isn't even a foot tall. The small leaves are trimmed in white and densely held in tight, compact mounds. Variegation aside, this tiny burnet closely resembles 'Tanna'. The purple-red flowers are little, though (only half an inch long), but they blanket the plant from mid to late summer. The color fades more quickly than that of 'Tanna', but the deadheads are not really distracting. 'Little Angel' was not nibbled by deer like taller burnets; I wonder if it was just too short for alert deer eating on the fly to notice.

'**Lilac Squirrel**' Korean burnet (*S. hakusanensis* 'Lilac Squirrel', p. 59) has the most dramatic flowers of them all. Playful purple-pink squirrel tails



'TANNA' BURNET



'LITTLE ANGEL'  
DWARF BURNET

#### | TRIAL PARAMETERS |

The Chicago Botanic Garden is currently evaluating 26 different burnets in comparative trials, which started in 2019. Since 2000, 35 burnets have been evaluated in two separate trials.

- **HOW LONG:** Minimum four years
- **ZONE:** 5b
- **CONDITIONS:** Full sun; well-drained, alkaline, clay-loam soil
- **CARE:** We provided minimal care, allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions. Besides observing their ornamental traits, we monitored the plants to see how well they grew and adapted to environmental and soil conditions while keeping a close eye on any disease or pest problems and assessing plant injury or losses over winter.

TOP PERFORMERS TO TRY



CANADIAN BURNET

Photos: Rob Whitworth/gapphotos.com (p. 54); Stephanie Fagan (p. 55); Visions/gapphotos.com (p. 56); courtesy of Richard Hawke (p. 57, top left and inset, p. 59, left); Danielle Sherry (p. 57, bottom); milietphotomedia.com (p. 58); Nova Photo Graphik/gapphotos.com (p. 59, right).



**'LILAC SQUIRREL' KOREAN BURNET**

on raspberry-hued stalks nod elegantly from early summer nearly to frost. An abundance of long pink stamens give 'Lilac Squirrel' its signature shagginess. The pendulous blooms gradually elongate to an impressive 8 inches before the color fades from light pink to drab white; prompt deadheading is time well spent. The tidy mounds of handsome gray-green leaves are 20 inches tall and 24 inches wide, and the floral stems reach a lax 34 inches tall. At full size, the hefty flowers bow the stems, which lean sharply to nearly horizontal at times, making the plant look borderline messy or, at best, informal. Giving it close neighbors—something it does not have in a well-spaced trial—is the support it needs to kiss the sky rather than the ground.

**Canadian burnet** (*S. canadensis*) is big, although at 34 inches tall, our plants have only gained half their potential height. The green pinnate leaves and robust bushy plants look great from spring to fall—no lax stems here. Erect white spikes, to 5 inches at full length, sport shorter stamens than 'Lilac Squirrel' and so are not as bushy. The flowers open along the spikes from the bottom upward rather than the top down like many burnets. The long bloom season starts in midsummer, with new flower spikes con-



**'PINK ELEPHANT' ORIENTAL BURNET**

tinuing to open into mid-autumn. Deadheading is key, however, because the aging flowers are distracting when there are more brown spikes than fresh blooms visible.

The flowers of **'Pink Elephant' Oriental burnet** (*S. tenuifolia* 'Pink Elephant') open pink, then turn light maroon with whitish stamens in 2-inch-long curved to pendent plumes. While not as dramatic as 'Lilac Squirrel', this burnet has an eye-catching profusion of slim spikes atop tall stems from mid-summer to early fall. The narrow plants were erect throughout the summer months; however, browning flower stems right down to the light green leaves in early fall were a low point. The robust bushy mounds displayed a unique trait among the burnets: The lowest tier of leaves rested on the ground, while the others were strictly vertical. Unfortunately, the tall stems were buffet height for roaming deer, so flowers were occasionally browsed.

## NEW KIDS WORTHY OF A SECOND LOOK



Robust **'Blackthorn' burnet** (*S.* 'Blackthorn') was one of the largest of all the burnets after just two years in the garden. In fact, it's now only about 20 inches shy of its expected 6-foot height. The crown of pink flowers accentuates the drama—3-inch-long vertical spikes sit atop tall, red-tinged stems beginning in late summer. Black-tipped, light pink stamens create a hazy nimbus over the rosy pink sepals, which in turn darken slightly after the stamens drop and remain colorful into late fall. Sturdy stems were the rule, with one or two leaning stems in midfall the exception. 'Blackthorn' was the last burnet to bloom naturally (not due to deer browsing), giving us plenty of time to appreciate its lush, shiny green foliage.

**'Pacific Pewter' burnet** (*S.* 'Pacific Pewter') caught my eye before it ever flowered—it has by far the most beautiful foliage of the burnets, which is saying a lot. The large, powder blue-green leaves are reminiscent of honeybush (*Melianthus major*, Zones 8–11), a South African native plant with exotic blue foliage. 'Pacific Pewter' has more than a passing resemblance to 'Lilac Squirrel'—it is a hybrid between *S. haku-sanensis* and *S. menziesii*—although at 3 inches long, its lovely purple flowers are not nearly as flamboyant. The blooms rise up on red wiry stems above neat mounds from midsummer to late fall. The flower show is pleasant, but the nodding spikes pull down the stems, resulting in a relaxed look. This is one time I might sacrifice some flower stems late in the season to improve the view to the handsome foliage.





Knowing nothing about a plant when a trial begins ensures objectivity, but sometimes it just confuses us. It took me a year to discover that **'Candlelight' Canadian burnet** (*S. canadensis* 'Candlelight') was supposed to have yellow foliage—and yes, the name should have been a clue. My first impression was that it was sick, although the color certainly did not point to any nutrient deficiency I knew. 'Candlelight' has the striking texture of Canadian burnet foliage, but lovely hints of glowing yellow suffuse the green leaflets—many are fully golden! White bottlebrush flowers beginning in late summer (this is one of the last burnets to bloom) play nicely off the colorful foliage. The burnished glow is enhanced as days shorten. In its second summer, it formed bushy mounds with flower stems doubling the overall height. Powdery mildew was a minor issue in midsummer but was not distracting.

The vibrant, raspberry pink flowers of **'Arnhem' great burnet** (*S. officinalis* 'Arnhem') are a delicious departure from the usual burgundy. The compact 1-inch spikes are borne generously on strictly upright, branching stems from early summer to early fall. The green pinnate foliage is densely packed into bushy mounds about half the height of the nearly 3-foot flower stems. I am most excited by the prospect of 'Arnhem' soaring to over 6 feet in the coming years—the smallish flowers will be more dramatic at eye level or bobbing above my head. Leaf spot was a slight problem beginning in midsummer, but the plants reacted by putting out an abundance of new leaves that masked the damaged ones. The flower stems turned brown and twiggy later; you can live with it (like I did) or remove the unsightly parts.



**'Red Thunder' great burnet** (*S. officinalis* 'Red Thunder') is a superior form of great burnet that was selected by Piet Oudolf from seed collected in Korea. I had the good fortune of seeing this species growing in the wild in South Korea, a truly magnificent sight. Thus far, 'Red Thunder' has kept a dense, compact habit but is expected to top off at 3 to 4 feet tall. Bushy mounds of green leaves were smothered in a cloud of deep burgundy-red drumstick flowers from midsummer to early fall. 'Red Thunder' was one of the stars of 2020, notable for its uniformity and strong floral show.

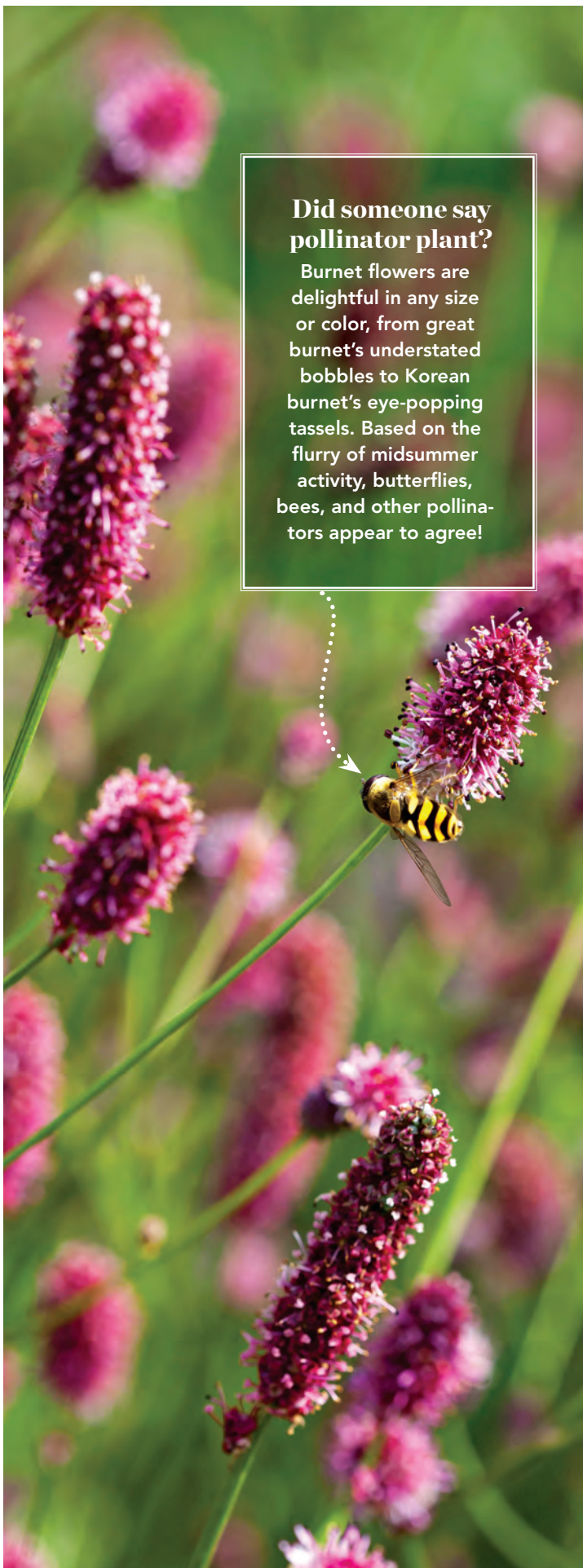


Photos this page: courtesy of Richard Hawke (top left); Clare Gaaney/gapphotos.com (top right); John Martin/gapphotos.com (bottom left and right); John Martin/gapphotos.com (bottom).



### Did someone say pollinator plant?

Burnet flowers are delightful in any size or color, from great burnet's understated bobbles to Korean burnet's eye-popping tassels. Based on the flurry of midsummer activity, butterflies, bees, and other pollinators appear to agree!



### | PLANT STATS |

## Get the bigger picture of burnet

Burnets are easy to grow, have great textural foliage, stay mostly disease-free, and put on a supremely unique bloom show from summer into fall, when much of the garden looks fried. Here are a few other things to know about these interesting perennials.

- **CONSISTENT MOISTURE IS KEY**

Burnets do not like droughty or soggy soil, although drier sites with irrigation are fine.

- **THEY ARE BEST DIVIDED IN SPRING OR FALL**

These are rhizomatous herbaceous perennials that spread through an underground stem that often sends out roots and shoots from its nodes. It's best to divide congested plants in spring or autumn to prevent larger clumps from getting center dieback.

- **SELF-SOWING IS COMMON**

Burnets hybridize readily, leading to the possibility of unique seedlings; however, seed is abundantly produced and can self-sow vigorously. Deadheading curtails self-seeding and can enhance the late-season foliar display, since declining flowers—especially white ones—are not so pretty.

- **CERTAIN PESTS CAN BE PESKY**

I wish that I could say burnets are trouble-free (as some references do), but deer, rabbits, and Japanese beetles were all annoying nibblers. Damage from Japanese beetles was usually a minor cosmetic blip—their flagrant intimacy was far more disturbing—whereas deer and rabbits seriously affected habit quality and flower display by reducing or delaying bloom.

- **THEIR FLOWERS ARE UNIQUE**

Burnet blossoms are in fact an inflorescence—the many-flowered spikes may be fingerlike spires, arching bottlebrushes, or compact raspberry-like knobs. Instead of having true petals, each tiny flower has colorful sepals and few to many exerted stamens, which brings both color and texture to the show. Indeed, bosses of especially long and showy stamens are what make some burnets look so fluffy.

- **FOLIAR VARIATION IS A BONUS**

Flowers are certainly the main draw of burnets, but their pinnately dissected leaves—from delicate to boldly textured—are beautiful all on their own. Green, blue-green, and gray-green are common colors, while leaflets haloed in white or splashed and dotted with yellow are pleasing novelties. Distinctive saw-toothed margins heighten the textural treat. The number of leaflets vary by species—ranging from 7 to 20—but are always odd-numbered because the terminal leaflet is not paired like the rest.



Photos this page, clockwise from top left: Robert Mabic/gapphotos.com; Danielle Sherry; dreamstime.com; Stephanie Fagan

# Sanguisorba trial results

RATING	SANGUISORBA	HEIGHT	WIDTH	FLOWER COLOR	FLOWER LENGTH	BLOOM PERIOD	FLOWER COVERAGE	FOLIAGE COLOR
NR	S. 'Blackthorn'	52 in.	48 in.	rosy pink and light pink	3 in.	late summer to late fall	excellent	green
NR	S. 'Pacific Pewter'	26 in.	28 in.	purple	3 in.	midsummer to late fall	excellent	blue-green
★★★★	S. 'Pink Tanna'	50 in.	36 in.	pink and white	1¼ in.	midsummer to early fall	excellent	green
NR	S. 'Sweet Caroline'	40 in.	40 in.	light pink	1¼ in.	midsummer to early fall	excellent	green
★★★★	S. 'Tanna'	25 in.	32 in.	dark burgundy	¾ in.	midsummer to early fall	excellent	green
★★★★	S. canadensis	34 in.	34 in.	white	5 in.	midsummer to late fall	excellent	green
NR	S. canadensis 'Candlelight'	26 in.	29 in.	white	2½ in.	late summer to late fall	good	yellow and green
★★★	S. hakusanensis	30 in.	32 in.	purple-pink	4 in.	early summer to midfall	good	gray-green
★★★★	S. hakusanensis 'Lilac Squirrel'	34 in.	24 in.	purple-pink	8 in.	early summer to late fall	excellent	gray-green
★★★	S. menziesii	47 in.	27 in.	dark pink-purple	3 in.	early summer to midsummer	excellent	blue-green
★★★	S. menziesii 'Dali Marble'	45 in.	39 in.	dark red-purple	1½ in.	midsummer to late fall	good	green, white margins
★★	S. minor	19 in.	38 in.	green, red	1 in.	late spring to early summer	excellent	blue-green
NR	S. obtusa	19 in.	38 in.	bright purple-pink	3 in.	midsummer to late fall	good	blue-green
★★★	S. officinalis	60 in.	45 in.	purple-red	½ in.	midsummer to early fall	excellent	green
NR	S. officinalis 'Arnhem'	34 in.	26 in.	raspberry pink	1 in.	early summer to early fall	excellent	green
NR	S. officinalis 'Chocolate Tip'	26 in.	18 in.	did not flower				green
NR	S. officinalis 'Crimson Queen'	36 in.	24 in.	did not flower				green
NR	S. officinalis 'Hime Waremoko'	18 in.	18 in.	dark burgundy	½ in.	midsummer to midfall	excellent	green
★★★	S. officinalis 'Lemon Splash'	40 in.	34 in.	deep red-purple	¾ in.	late summer to late fall	excellent	green, yellow speckled
★★★★	S. officinalis var. microcephala 'Little Angel'	10 in.	22 in.	purple-red	½ in.	midsummer to late summer	excellent	green, white margins
NR	S. officinalis 'Red Thunder'	20 in.	26 in.	purple-red	¾ in.	midsummer to early fall	excellent	green
NR	S. officinalis 'Shiro-Fukurin'	35 in.	42 in.	deep rosy pink	1 in.	early fall to early winter	excellent	light green, creamy margins
★★★	S. tenuifolia	70 in.	28 in.	white	2 in.	midsummer to early fall	good	dark green
★★★	S. tenuifolia 'Pink Elephant'	59 in.	30 in.	pink and maroon	2 in.	midsummer to early fall	excellent	light green
NR	S. tenuifolia var. alba	32 in.	20 in.	white	2½ in.	early summer to midfall	fair	dark green

#### RATING KEY |

★★★★★ Excellent  
 ★★★★ Great  
 ★★★ Good

★★ Fair  
 ★ Poor  
 NR not rated (too new to the trial)

#### SOURCES

- Digging Dog Nursery, Albion, CA; 707-937-1130; diggingdog.com
- Far Reaches Farm, Port Townsend, WA; 360-385-5114; farreachesfarm.com
- Edelweiss Perennials, Canby, OR; edelweissperennials.com
- Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, NC; 919-772-4794; plantdelights.com

Richard Hawke is plant evaluation manager at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois.