

plant focus

Annual Phlox

I'll never forget the first time I saw this plant. It was 2003, and the phlox Intensia series had just been introduced as the first annual phlox grown from cuttings that exhibited heat tolerance. I had my doubts. The annual phlox in my garden was grown from seed and often looked hot and tired by mid summer. Then, I saw gorgeous pots of this new annual phlox at a July trade show. I assumed they were grown in ideal and perhaps unrealistic conditions. Then, in September, the Michigan State University trial gardens displayed very mature plants that were cascading over the edge of an enormous container—covered with beautiful flowers. I was sold. I've been a proponent of this terribly underused plant ever since.

These plants belong to the genus *Phlox* and the species *drummondii* but the exceptional heat tolerance comes from breeding with other species. These phlox are propagated vegetatively—that is, from cuttings, not from seeds. They are frost-tolerant annuals that can be planted in late April or early May, right after the last freeze. And once established in the garden, this phlox can tolerate temperatures in the 20's. The flowers look very similar to those of creeping phlox and the growth

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Annual Phlox

Plant type: Annual

Plant size: 6-12 inches tall & wide

Habit: Most are trailing or mounding, some are upright

Flower color: White, pinks, rose, violets, salmon, lavenders, red, magenta

Flower size: 1 inch wide

Bloom period: Spring through fall

Light: Sun

Uses: Containers, window boxes, hanging baskets

Remarks: Wide variety of colors, including multicolored combinations



Intensia 'Star Brite'

www.provenwinners.com



Cohen Propagation Nurseries

Phoenix 'Sky'



Cohen Propagation Nurseries

Phoenix 'Pink Touch'



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Astoria 'Pink'



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Grammy 'Purple and White'



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habit is also spreading, but plant heights vary from 6 up to 12 inches tall. Flowers come in a rainbow of colors that includes white, pink, rose, violet, salmon, star patterns, and even a tricolored magenta, gold and white. I have grown this plant in hanging baskets and used it in beds or pots where the self-cleaning flowers continuously rebloom until late fall.

You're probably wondering, "Why don't gardeners buy this plant?" I have my theories. One's first perception of this plant develops from its name. When gardeners think "phlox" they think perennial and then they might assume that this plant blooms for a while in spring like the perennial creeping phlox (*Phlox subulata*). Or maybe they think of the perennial garden phlox that blooms late summer and often gets powdery mildew (*Phlox paniculata*). This plant is nothing like those. It flowers all summer without any major disease or insect problems.

The Intensia series will probably be the easiest annual phlox to find. It has about 7 varieties that include pure white, pinks, lavenders, and an interesting purple and white bi-colored variety called 'Star Brite.' The Astoria series is slightly taller but includes a broader range of colors, from 'Pink Splash' to a beauti-

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Cohen Propagation Nurseries

Power Phlox 'Purple Star'



www.jacksonandperkins.com

Astoria 'Lavender'



Cohen Propagation Nurseries

Power Phlox 'Red Star'



www.jacksonandperkins.com

Astoria 'Blue'



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21st Century 'Buttercream'



www.jacksonandperkins.com

Astoria 'Hot Pink'



www.jacksonandperkins.com

Astoria 'Pink White Star'



www.provenwinners.com

Intensia 'Pink'

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ful new 'Peach.'

Two years ago, a more upright series called Power Phlox was introduced. It also offers a few additional colors including a very unique 'Purple Star.' Its magenta flowers have white serrated edges with purple centers accented by vibrant yellow stamens. Phoenix is another series that evolved from this new breeding and it has more of a trailing/mounding habit. It was just introduced last year and it can be hard to find. Phoenix comes in several colors and makes beautiful hanging baskets and patio planters.

It wouldn't be fair to discuss annual phlox without mentioning seed-grown *Phlox drummondii*. The 21st Century series from PanAmerican Seed is the most popular seed-produced phlox on the market. Its color range is enormous and includes a beautiful pale yellow called 'Buttercream.' Many garden centers will offer it in flats alongside pansies this spring. The main difference between the 21st Century series and the vegetative types is that 21st Century lacks the heat-tolerant genetics. It will perform well, but once flowering ends, it will produce seed that will divert energy from additional flower production. Removing the spent flowers (deadheading) will reduce this tendency and encourage more flowering.

Another interesting seed-produced series is the Grammy series. It includes many colors,



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Intensia 'Lavender Glow'

but Grammy 'Pink and White' has rose-pink blooms sprinkled with white—very interesting. If you've ever seen it, you know what I'm talking about.

After four or five years on the market and tremendous advances in color choices, I am still amazed at how many gardeners have never tried this plant. In sun or partial sun, this plant should be almost as popular as verbena.

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Annual phlox is an excellent choice for window boxes.



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Intensia 'Lilac Rose'