The weather is cold, and I for one, find myself staying indoors a lot. But the thought of spring is on my mind as I enjoy reading through all the garden catalogs arriving in my mailbox. If you lose plants because of the freezes this winter, look at it as an opportunity to try something new.

Don’t know where to start? Try looking at the “All-America Selections.” AAS was founded in 1931 and continues to be the oldest, most established international plant testing organization in North America.

As always, the 2010 AAS winners were judged in side-by-side comparison tests with standard varieties and were selected based entirely on the plants’ performance. Only those few varieties that demonstrate unique characteristics, exceptional productivity and superior garden performance make the All-American Selections list each year.

When it comes to bedding plants and vegetables, All-America Selection winners generally are considered good choices.

**Gaillardia ‘Mesa Yellow’**
Mesa Yellow is the first hybrid blanket flower with a controlled plant habit but flowers prolifically.

The 3-inch, daisy-like flowers and globe-shaped seed heads offer a superior presentation of color that continues throughout the summer. The bright yellow flowers are rich in nectar and will attract butterflies. Especially notable is the improved plant habit of Mesa Yellow – they do not get tall, loose and floppy. The neat, mounded plants reach about 16 inches tall and about 20 inches wide in full sun and are adaptable to smaller gardens or any type of containers. When planted near the outside edge of the container, they will cascade down the container.

**Viola ‘Endurio Sky Blue Martien’**
The color blue – true blue – is not common in flowers. That’s why plants that produce blue flowers are so treasured making Endurio Sky Blue Martien a welcome addition to any garden.
This unique spreading/mounding viola may look delicate, but it delivers tough-as-nails performance in the garden. It will flower throughout the cool season from late October through April when planted in fall. It also can be planted in early spring, covering planters and landscapes with sky-blue blooms until early May.

Like all violas, the flowers are relatively small, at just under an inch, but you will be amazed how they cover plants in beautiful sky blue. These spreading/mounding plants grow to 6 inches tall and 10-12 inches wide. Use these violas along with other cool-season bedding plants in window boxes and hanging gardens as well as in balcony and patio planters.

**Zinnia ‘Zahara Starlight Rose’**

Zahara zinnias are the result of hybridizing *Zinnia elegans*, the garden zinnia, with *Zinnia angustifolia*, the narrow-leaf zinnia. The results are compact plants with prolific flowers and excellent disease resistance. Zahara zinnias come in a variety of colors, and the rose-and-white bicolor flowers make Zahara Starlight Rose an excellent addition.

Grown in full sun with good air circulation, they have proven resistances to leaf spot and mildew, which can devastate healthy plants and cause early death. The unique flowers are white with a prominent star-shaped eye of rose – although the rose star may fade some in intense heat. These superior qualities resulted in long-lasting zinnia plants that provide generous color from late spring to late summer.

Zahara Starlight Rose is heat- and drought-tolerant and easy to grow. The mature plants are midsized, about 12 to 14 inches tall and wide – large enough to make a bold statement in beds, containers or patio planters.

For more information, or to see photos of the winners, visit [http://www.all-americaselections.org/Winners.asp](http://www.all-americaselections.org/Winners.asp).

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.
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