What new plants are you trying this year?

The fun of gardening is trying out new plants. Sometimes we are pleasantly surprised and sometimes we are just surprised. Here are a few of the “new-to-me” plants I am trying.

The sword bean is an attention grabber. With its 12 to 14-inch long seedpod, this legume is an eye catcher. Other names for the sword bean are Chickasaw lima bean, Brazilian broad bean, coffee bean, horse bean, mole bean and raba de burro.

The sword bean, known scientifically as *Canavalia gladiata*, is not eaten very frequently, but has the potential to become a food source. The ripe seeds can be eaten after cooking, but only after removing the seed-coat and several changes of water. The seed is used as feed for cattle and chicken, but if eaten in considerable quantity dry seeds may cause poisoning.

Sword bean is grown primarily as an ornamental in the U.S. It is used as a climber on fences and houses. This aggressive vine quickly covers a trellis and produces pretty purple-pink blossoms.
Another vine that took me by surprise is calabaza. Sometimes referred to as West Indian pumpkin or green pumpkin, calabaza (*Cucurbita moschata*) belongs to the squash family. It is grown throughout the tropics and sub-tropics.

This large, pumpkin-like winter squash grows on very long, trailing vines. The large leaves are lobed with branching tendrils. The flowers are yellow and pollination is done by bees.

Calabaza is round in shape and varies in size. It can be as large as a watermelon or as small as a cantaloupe. The color of calabaza can also vary and may include greens, tans, reds and oranges. Some squash are all one color while others are multi-colored and may include all of colors listed above. This squash is popular in the Caribbean as well as Central and South America.

According to references, calabaza has a sweet flavor and its texture is firm. This is similar to the taste and texture of more familiar varieties of squash, such as butternut or acorn. Since mine are not quite ready, I’ll let you know about the taste.

Another “new-to-me” plant is the voodoo lily, specifically *Amorphophallus bulbifer*. It’s one of the prettiest of the voodoo lilies and the inflorescence doesn’t smell bad compared to its well known cousin, the corpse flower.
Amorphophallus bulbifer gets its name due to the bulbils that form on top of the leaves. The bulbils are like "little bulbs" and when the plant goes dormant they fall to the ground and start new plants the next spring.

This plant likes the shade and is an attractive feature to a shady corner. In spring, you will see a flower if the tuber is mature enough, if not then you will get a leaf. The dark green leaf and spotted stems provide an unusual look in the landscape. The "flower" is characterized by a compound inflorescence composed of numerous tightly packed florets on a rod shaped "spadix" which is often surrounded by a leaf like bract or "spathe". The spathe is about 8 inches long with a rosy colored throat.

These “not so common” plants are difficult to find in stores. I’ve been lucky enough to be given seeds by other passionate gardeners. Perhaps you have a gardener friend that would be willing to share.

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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