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Contributed by Susie Middleton

Planting for Pollinators – the Trial Gardens at Mount Cuba

With so many plants to pick from – how do you find the best one for your garden? One way is to follow the results of Botanical Gardens and their work with trial gardens. A trial garden is a research method used to determine the best cultivars for an area.

I recently saw a presentation by Sam Hoag, Manager of Research at Mount Cuba. Their research team uses the Trial Garden method to evaluate native plants and related cultivars for horticultural and ecological value, and to highlight the ecosystem services native plants provide. His presentation focused on the results from **Echinacea, Helenium, Phlox, Monarda, Baptisia and Coreopsis** trials. The website explains their process.

“Multiple plants of each taxa are grown in a 15,000 sq. ft. trial garden that includes areas for growing both sun-loving and shade-loving plants. The clay-loam soil in the trial garden has an average pH of 6.5. The Trial Garden is maintained with the home gardener in mind. Plants are watered as needed during the first year in order to get them established, but afterwards they are left on their own. Pesticides are not used unless there is a serious threat to the entire trial’s survivability.

Perennial plant trials usually run for a period of three years to ensure the plants experience a variety of weather conditions. It is our policy to replace dead plants after the first winter in order to compensate for poor establishment or initial plant quality. However, no replacements are made during subsequent years. Each taxa is evaluated weekly and assigned a rating based on a scale of 1-5. This rating takes into account many factors including habit, floral display, disease resistance, hardiness, and foliage quality. The average of these weekly ratings is then used to calculate the final score displayed on this website.”



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You can see the full results by clicking on this link <https://mtcubacenter.org/research/trial-garden/> but the winners for each trial are shown below.



Echinacea purpurea 'Pica Bella'



Helenium 'Kanaria'



Monarda fistula 'Clare Grace'



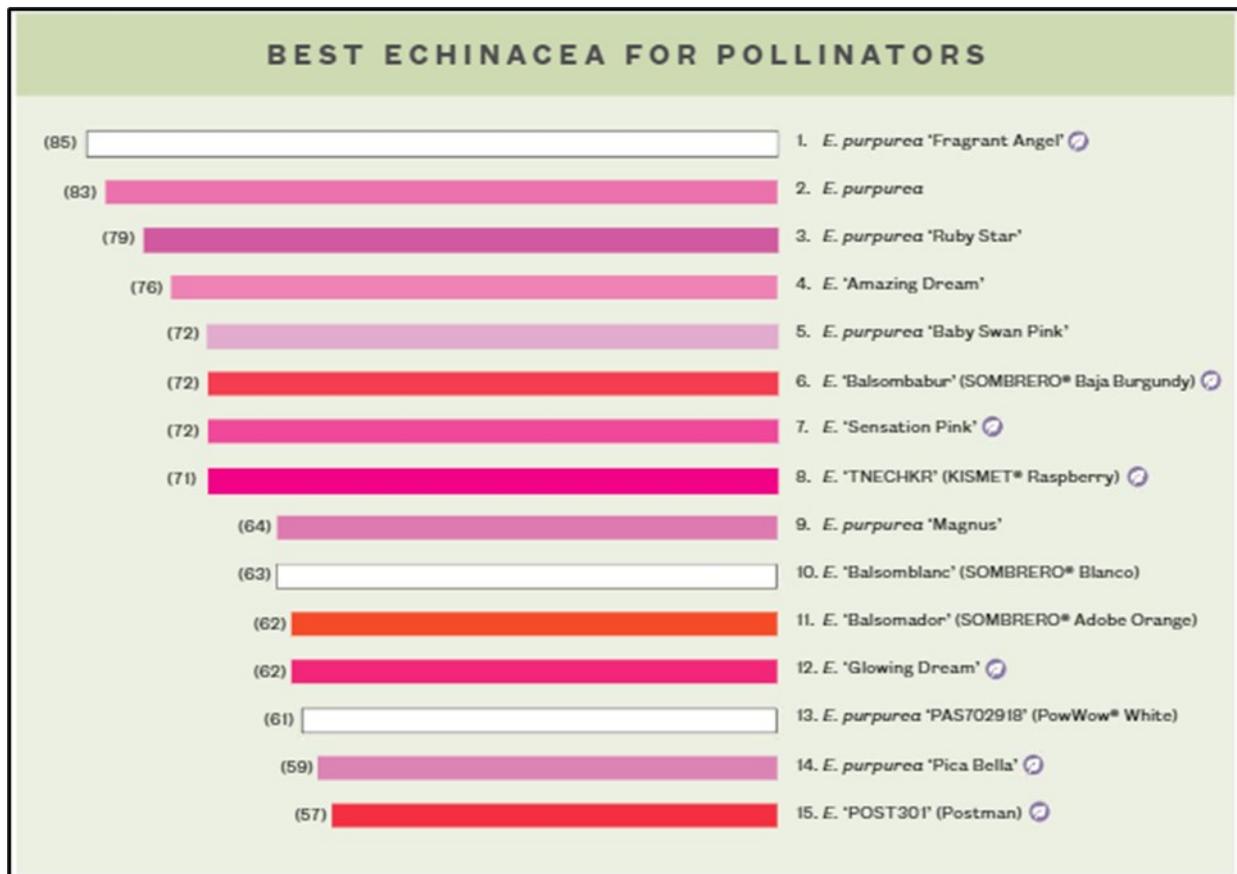


Baptisia 'Lemon Meringue'



Coreopsis palustris 'Summer Sunshine'

Finally, one of the most important features of this trial was their focus on pollinators. A team of citizen scientists monitored the gardens daily for pollinator activity with striking results. These charts are included in the reports for each trial.



[Visit the site to learn more.](#)