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UNH Plant Breeding Program Leads to a New Pair of Annuals that are Proven Winners

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Rosanna Freyre was in search of an early bloomer, a sapphire or sunburst beauty with petals sure to please. For this plant breeder, new or uncommon plants with beautiful blooms are always the goal in her greenhouse. It's what consumers demand, and it's what she delivered with Anagallis "Wildcat Blue" and "Wildcat Orange," a pair of patented champion flower cultivars bred at the University of New Hampshire and now selling commercially.



Rosanna Freyre, breeder of Anagallis "Wildcat Blue" and "Wildcat Orange"

Freyre, a research assistant professor who introduced the Ornamental Breeding Program at UNH in 1998, began this project with a \$107,000 grant from the New Hampshire Industrial Research Center and Pleasant View Gardens, a large wholesale plant grower and supplier in Loudon, N. H.

Her goal: improve on two cultivars of *Anagallis monelli*: "Sunrise" and "Skylover Blue."

"Sunrise has bright orange flowers, but very small blooms and weak growth," explains Freyre. "Skylover Blue has an unusual blue flower color that combines well with other colors, but tends to have long internodes or branches with a leggy appearance. It also blooms late."

In fact, too late for Mother's Day, the most popular occasion for sales of annual plants. A bud with no bloom for mom? As any garden retailer knows, the only thing worse is an unexpected frost.

Freyre conducted several cycles of hybridizations and selection, looking for a number of different traits: a compact plant, vivid hue, early blooms and large flowers. If she could achieve all that, she just might have bred a winner. Of course, her research is both an art and a science, so a certain amount of trial and error meant a few "mistakes" along the way.



Wildcat Blue

"The beauty of breeding is that we can create new flower colors that did not exist before," Freyre says. "But sometimes we find plants with misshapen flowers or weak growth. Each generation is tested in the greenhouse and the field; only a few plants with the best traits are selected."

In the end, Freyre did produce a pair of winners with "Wildcat Blue" and "Wildcat Orange"—"proven" winners in fact. Proven Selections, a trademark program of Pleasant View Gardens, is a horticulture seal of approval reserved for superior quality annual plants, according to Henry Huntington, president of the family

business. Patented new cultivars with abundant blooms and robust growth, these plants command higher prices.

“Consumers are always looking for something new and different and Rosanna is breeding a new generation,” says Huntington. “Both ‘Wildcat Blue’ and ‘Wildcat Orange’ have intensely bright and vivid flower colors. In a garden center, a hanging basket or window box, they really stand out.”

“Part of my research is funded by private industry, so I’m pleased if I can increase sales and customer appeal,” says Freyre, who is also working on a set of production guidelines that will give growers, “a recipe on how to produce the best possible finished plants—when to start, when they need additional light, when to pinch or trim back.”

While Pleasant View supplies plants to greenhouses and large retailers like Home Depot throughout the northeast and as far south as Virginia, in New Hampshire Huntington maximizes the UNH connection. “Locally born and bred. People take pride in that.”

Huntington and Freyre can also take pride in the fact that consumer interest is high and orders are up. If the new and improved Anagallis take off, Huntington believes these cultivars could sell more than one million units and generate retail sales of more than \$1 million. The Anagallis cultivars are also being propagated at EuroAmerican Propagators in California, and a number of nurseries throughout the United States and Canada are selling the finished plants. -- Contributing Writer: Tracy Manforte Sweet '92

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