



The left photo shows several color varieties and larger leaves and flowers of the new Cora periwinkle series developed by Goldsmith Seed Co. Right: The second image shows the start of aerial phytophthora blight, or one of the "stepped-on" diseases on a garden variety of periwinkle

A Rainy Season Periwinkle?

Doug Caldwell, Collier County Landscape Horticulture

Plant periwinkle now? Traditionally periwinkles (*Catharanthus roseus*) are planted during the dry fall and winter periods as they can not tolerate wet feet and succumb to what Bob Cook refers to as the "stepped-on" diseases. The most aggressive of these diseases has been the aerial phytophthora blight, which can wilt a bed of newly planted periwinkle in a matter of days. I spoke with Jim Pugh, Manager at one of our largest bedding plant nurseries, American Farms. He joked about using these periwinkles as a summer annual, "I used to promise a written guarantee that they'd die within 2 weeks!"

However, there is some exciting news in the periwinkle world! After 10 years of research, Goldsmith Seed in Gilroy, CA. has released this year (spring, 2008) a patented, aerial-phytophthora-blight-resistant periwinkle (say that quickly 10 times!). It is called the Cora Series and is named in memory of Cora Van Wingerden. Many consider Cora the mother of modern U.S. greenhouse floriculture industry. Besides that, she is the mother of 16 children, with 15 active in the greenhouse-nursery industry today throughout the country.

Although Cora vinca is resistant to the key stepped-on disease, this is not to say that they aren't susceptible to the other genera of root attacking pathogens such as pythium, fusarium, rhizoctonia, etc. According to developer Don Snow with Goldsmith Seed, reported that in trials at Texas A&M, after a month of rain, the Cora vinca held up without fungicide applications. So it looks very promising as a spring-summer-fall annual. They may live longer. The leaves as well as the flowers are maybe 20% bigger than your

average old time periwinkle. Plus the leaves are glossy and also a darker green making it a very attractive bedding plant.

There are 6 colors available now: white, lavender, deep lavender, apricot (with a red "eye"), burgundy and violet. Recent arrivals include a pink and punch (as in "Hawaiian") flowering varieties.

Typically periwinkles flourish in austere nutrient deprived "soils". You may have noticed stray periwinkles growing quite nicely in the middle of nowhere, along the roadside in a bone-drying, sandy situation. This seems strange to say, but do not add much organic matter and minimize watering when using periwinkles! Plant them high in a well drained bed. Avoid the temptation to plant them a little deep, like a tomato seedling, otherwise the plant will be more prone to root rot diseases.

Cora periwinkles thrive in full sun and reach a height of 14 to 16 inches with a spread of 2 feet(the first year!). Add some tropical color and pizzazz to your landscape beds with the addition of these robust and stunning flowers. Just try a few in one location, since this is a new strain there could be some issues with it in our climate. Time will tell!

For more information on home gardening, contact the University of Florida, Collier County Cooperative Extension Service, Master Gardener Plant Clinic, at 353-2872. If you have a specimen that you want identified, the Extension Plant Clinic at 14700 Immokalee Rd. is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, handicap or national origin. For updates on southwest Florida Horticulture and more landscape information visit: <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu>