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DOG-DAY DEALS

NURSERIES OFFER BARGAINS AS THE SUMMER SLUMPS

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Midsummer draws a bull's-eye on Atlanta, where heat shimmers off pavement and saps human skin as well as foliage. This summer, add the drought and water restrictions, and your gardening motivation probably doesn't make it past the back porch.

But who says you can't garden during these dog days?

Sure, setting out plants -- and even moving established ones -- can be risky in 90-degree temperatures, so most experts advise waiting for cooler days. But Atlanta-area nurseries and garden centers are brimming with late-season sales on plants that can make your shopping worth the gamble.

Garden shopping also can be more fun this time of year. Spring-fever crowds are gone. Nursery attendants have time to advise. And best of all, you'll find deals such as 30 percent-off perennials, annual hanging baskets for \$6, 50-cent summer bulbs.

So, who wants to be a bargain hunter?

If you do, prepare to mine some new sources. Chain-store garden centers are indispensable for their around-the-corner convenience. But if your tastes are more universal, or if you've finally decided to go for that rose garden you've been promising yourself, you'll need to be adventurous -- try finding something other than the Nearly Wild rose. And no fair paging through catalogs.

Below is a sample of what's available at some metro nurseries. A few places will require a Saturday safari or Sunday drive, but call on that sense of adventure, and pack plenty of plastic bags to protect your car's trunk and floorboards.

Also, prices and availability are subject to change before press time, so use our list as a guide.

Happy hunting!

Getting started

Most well-stocked garden centers offer everything from cactuses to cannas, but Hastings Nature & Garden Center, 3920 Peachtree Road N.E., 404-869-7447, advertises itself as the city's oldest. Founded as a mail-order seed company in 1889, Hastings' 2 1/2 acres in Brookhaven contains envy-inducing display gardens as well as merchandise.

You'll find almost everything: perennials, annuals, seasonal vegetables, herbs, shrubs and trees as well as an exhaustive seed and book selection. There's also a goldfish pond and animals including iguanas and guinea pigs. And the railroad garden attracts kids of all ages.

Annuals

Forrester's Flowers, 2070 Cheshire Bridge Road N.E., 404-325-0333, makes a statement each spring and summer with a prodigious assortment of sun and shade annuals. Mandevilla, bougainvillea, plumbago and hibiscus abound in pot, vine and standard form. If you're looking for roses, check behind the greenhouses. There's usually a surprisingly diverse selection.

Ladyslipper Rare Plant Nursery, 7418 Hickory Flat Highway, Woodstock, 770-345-2998, is a wholesale supplier open to the public. And if you want coleuses, owners Lula and Kelly Norris have 'em. Flats of the multicolor and single-colored varieties nestled recently under a giant old oak along Ga. 140. So did impatiens, celosias and myriad varieties of sun annuals. You'll also find pots of perennials such as purple coneflower, black-eyed Susan, daylilies and butterfly bushes, plus handmade wrought-iron yard art.

Perennials

Habersham Gardens, 2067 Manchester St., Atlanta, 404-873-2484, is a must stop for perennial lovers. If you can block out the roar of I-85, you'll soon find plenty of plant tags to peruse. There's even a collector's corner for the ultra-enthusiast. And perhaps the city's broadest hydrangea inventory.

Containers

You'll find imported terra cotta everywhere, but Planters Nursery, 3143 E. Shadowlawn Ave., Buckhead, 404-261-6002, puts as much emphasis on the vessel as the plant stock. According to vice president Tyne Martinez, the shop's specialty is custom arrangements, but if you want to bring in your kids' art-class creations and pick out something to fill 'er up, they'll be happy to help.

Aside from marine-blue globes from Vietnam, you'll find striped and diamond-spangled creations from an Atlanta artist whom Martinez won't name, citing competitors' jealousy. Don't miss the creamy-smooth, alabaster-colored concrete pots sculpted in the Italian tradition. And yes, there's plenty of terra cotta for the purist.

Daylilies

If you're ready to venture beyond Stella de Oro, head to Fern Cove Daylily Farm, 400 Jim Starr Road, Newnan, 770-502-9320. Calling for directions is a must. Owners Gerald and Mary Ann Denney offer 80 percent of the country's top-rated daylilies, plus a handy list of every lily in their inventory, its color, bloom time and vital characteristics. They're equally generous with their time and advice.

Hostas

The Greenhouse Nursery, 5907 Covington Highway, Decatur, 770-987-4066. Approximately 120 varieties, including rare ones. Prices are reasonable. Some newly divided variegated plants are three for \$10. Many are in bloom, so you can examine flower color, and all are in top shape.

Randy's Perennials & Watergardens, 523 W. Crogran St. (off U.S. 29), Lawrenceville, 770-822-0676, boasts a handsome selection of hostas. If you're a neophyte, check out the helpful display garden.

Roses

Pick of the Crop, 3311 Ga. 9, Alpharetta, 770-475-2052, is coupled with a florist business, but if you're a budding rosarian, don some sunscreen and save the nice, flat-paved greenhouses for later. You'll have to yank weeds from some pots, and avoid thorny, sprawling branches, but all the major suppliers -- Weeks, Jackson & Perkins -- are well-represented.

Autumn Hill Nursery, 4256 Earney Road, Woodstock, 770-442-3901, hosts an annual spring rose festival, and luckily, not everything vacates the premises that day. There's still a healthy selection of hybrid teas, floribundas, antiques, David Austin English roses, climbers and other varieties.

Trees

Thirteen greenhouses of shrubs, grasses, ornamentals and perennials await at Rex Nursery, 6285 Ga. 42, Rex (west of I-675), 770-961-6790. The sight of greenhouses and dark pink crape myrtle trees says all you need to know. You'll also find the tree nursery within hiking distance of the greenhouses.

The Greenhouse Nursery (see hostas), stocks more than 170 varieties of Japanese maples, many of them collector material.

The sizable parking lot at McGinnis Farms' retail site, 5610 McGinnis Ferry Road, Alpharetta, 770-740-2820, is ringed by a wall of balled-and-burlapped trees. Call for directions.

Water gardens

Randy's Perennials & Watergardens (see hostas) is worth the drive if you dream about lotus-filled ponds.

Atlanta Water Gardens, 2165 Cheshire Bridge Road N.E., 404-235-0739, with its tranquil sounds of gushing water, will leave you drooling for more than its fountains -- the store offers a complete line of water gardening products, including Japanese koi and plants, as well as indoor fountains and garden accessories.

Worth the trip

The Antique Rose Emporium, 5565 Cavender Creek Road, Dahlonega, 706-864-5884, is about an hour's drive north of downtown Atlanta on Ga. 400. If you're sweet on roses, it's almost obligatory. Just gas up and call for directions. Carved from a remote North Georgia hillside, the nursery offers an impressive inventory of "old garden" selections. A hilltop display garden combines them with perennials, and the retail roses sit in terraced rows below the garden, complete with detailed identification tags. Unique perennials are also for sale.

Yard art

Birdhouses and metal sculptures aren't the only finishing touches at Habersham Gardens (see perennials). How about a tiered iron chandelier with multicolor glass shades ready for votive candles? Or a disco ball?

"One of our clients did a whole Gloria Gaynor garden with a disco ball," says manager Brad Balsis, adding that the staff scours craft fairs for original art, which can include furniture, steppingstones, holiday ornaments and mobiles.

The Urban Gardener, 347 Boulevard S.E., Atlanta, 404-529-9980, sits only a few hundred feet from snarling I-20, but the property is chock-full of imaginative displays -- Bengal Tiger cannas and other lush tropicals and perennials tower through the roof and windows of, appropriately, an ancient car.

Photo: Red pentas and Indian Summer rudbeckia are still growing strong when other annuals and perennials have done their thing. / KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff

Photo: Lavelle, Planters' resident cat, is partial to Goldsturm rudbeckia and Sunny Border Blue veronica. / KIMBERLY

SMITH / Staff

Photo: Blue and white make for a cool late-summer combination (left), in this case the perennials Alba echinacea and Sunny Border Blue veronica. / KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff

Photo: The bright blue blooms of the summer bulb 'Elaine' agapanthus attract a bee. / KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff

Graphic: On the Web

Atlanta Water Gardens: www.atlantawatergardens.com

Autumn Hill Nursery: home.flash.net/~gardenga/aboutautumnhill.html

Fern Cove Daylily Farm: ferncove@juno.com

The Urban Gardener: urbgard@mindspring.com

Rex Nursery: www.bigtreesga.com

Antique Rose Emporium:
www.antiqueroseemporium.com

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