

Green Zinnias

A schoolgirl's horticultural experiment becomes the 'Envy' of the 4-H fair. BY SUSAN SARVER



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eager to propagate. She showed me how to salvage the brittle brown seeds from the dried heads early in the fall and sow them generously the following spring. I was drawn to zinnias' capacity for forgiveness—drooping into a gentle hint when they were low on water, tolerating crowded conditions without demanding to be thinned, and bearing up against an occasional visit from a baseball. They lived up to a child's simple expectations for a flower. They showed a willingness to bloom in many colors and a magnanimity toward frequent cuttings. I wondered if the green ones worked the same way.

It would be strange to grow the beloved blossoms in the hue of a common leaf. The black-and-white pages of the catalogue only fueled my imagination for green's possibili-

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BY THE TIME I WAS 13, I HAD MANAGED TO COLLECT MORE consolatory ribbons than anyone else in my 4-H club. I had a talent for baking airholes in my cookies, sewing seams full of drunken stitches, and painting pictures that elevated the beauty of even the most uninspired entries. I had almost decided to give up 4-H entirely, until I discovered green zinnias.

I CAME ACROSS THEM IN THE MIDDLE OF A LATE-WINTER snowstorm, when there was nothing better to do than nurture thoughts of spring with a flip through the seed catalogue. I admit I had always been drawn to oddities—giant pumpkins, rutabagas, strawberries guaranteed to fill the palm. This time it was zinnias known by the name 'Envy'. My grandmother had taught me that zinnias were

Zinnias bloom prolifically from midsummer through the first frost, when the heads (above) can be harvested for seed (below) or for use in dried arrangements. Green zinnias (*Z. elegans* 'Envy')—a flat-petaled, semidouble type—grow on two-foot-tall plants.



THE POTTING SHED

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ties—the exciting green of a feisty chameleon, the biting lime that my mother forbade me to wear, the exotic color of a papaya skin, or the creamy soft green hidden inside an avocado. It was when I imagined the disapproval of a panel of 4-H judges that I knew I *had* to grow them. Green zinnias would break tradition and the rules all at once.

THE SEEDS WERE DISAPPOINTINGLY ordinary, light and fragile with no commitment to color. “Don’t worry,” my mother said, noticing my dismay when they arrived. “They’ll go wild in our soil.” If there was one thing my mother understood, it was dirt. She believed that the ground that would ultimately feed her family had to be fed itself, a contention that was carried out by befriending a sheep farmer. Every spring my mother paid

den was ambitious.

The green zinnias kept pace with the vegetables that summer. Their stems were straight and tough, as though they intended to turn themselves into tree trunks. The leaves were as large and firm as hands, secure and ready for a hearty shake. They were well above my knees when the massive buds appeared.

ALL AT ONCE, THEY BURST FORTH into gigantic, thick-petaled blossoms in slight variations of soft, mint green. A few stray marigold seeds, planted by the wind, bloomed alongside them like small, flaming devils. I yielded to their temptation. I decided that they, too, must be included in my brazen entry.

On the day of the judging, I snipped a basketful of the best blossoms I could find. The stems were straight, the petals and leaves were free of bug holes, and the stamens were just starting to open. My

Zinnias tolerate crowded conditions without demanding to be thinned.



a visit to the farm up the road where she had a standing invitation to take all the manure she needed.

As much as I disliked the manure pilgrimage and its odor, which had a tendency to linger, I had to admit that Mom’s formula worked. Every vegetable that emerged from our gar-

irreverent statement demanded exquisite articulation. To enhance the judges’ responses, I took care to distribute the marigolds unevenly for an overall disheveled look. I selected a basket that was plain and simple—one that would sit silently and let the flowers have all the say.

Experience ‘Envy’

“ZINNIA ELEGANS ‘ENVY’ IS NOT TO everyone’s taste, but I like to use it in combination with white, cream, and green foliage,” writes Georgeanne Brennan in *Backyard Bouquets* (Chronicle Books; \$18.95), an inspirational 144-page softcover filled with ideas for growing flowers and creating beautiful bouquets. **W. Atlee Burpee & Co.**—which offers packets of ‘Envy’ (50 seeds, \$2.45) and Candy Cane Mix (50 seeds, \$1.95)—recommends arranging chartreuse bloomers with yellow and pink, as well.



Flowers were judged on the first day of the fair. The tent was jammed with polite and proper entries of conservative pinks and whites along with traditional reds and yellows. They were crowded side by side in the strictest of containers. Amid surprised gazes, I placed my entry on the table, filled out the proper forms, and left to find the Ferris wheel, the ringtoss, and the blueberry pie.

After a full day at the fair, I returned to the judging tent, where I found a table filled with flowers bearing blue, red, and a few white ribbons. But my entry was not among them. Finally I glanced toward the table holding the champion exhibits. There it was: Hanging from my basket of loud blossoms was an enormous purple grand-champion ribbon!

Although it wasn’t the finish I had planned, it seemed a proper point of departure from my 4-H career. The next year I held firm in my decision to quit—until one gray afternoon late in winter, when I went thumbing through the seed catalogue and discovered zinnias with peppermint stripes.

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