A new disease has swept across the country and promises to change the way many of us will garden this year. *Impatiens downy mildew* has found a way to dethrone the most popular bedding plant in the U.S. Downy mildew first appeared in England around the beginning of the 21st century. It showed up in California in 2004 and limited areas of the South in 2009. Here in Michigan in 2012, impatiens that were thriving one week were defoliated and nearly dead a week later.

Regular, seed-grown impatiens (*Impatiens walleriana*) are the victims of this rampant disease. In the early phase, the leaves yellow and curl. If you turn the leaves over, you will clearly see the downy mildew (white powdery spores) on the underside. In the late phase, plants completely defoliate within a couple weeks.

The disease produces spores that can move in the air and overwinter in the soil. Even if you didn’t have downy mildew last year, it is very likely that you will have it this year.

Growers can apply specialized fungicides that will protect impatiens for up to 6 weeks, but there is no cure once the plants are infected. It is unpractical for the home gardener to try treating the disease since these chemicals need to be applied frequently by a certified applicator.

Many commercial growers have chosen not to offer regular or double impatiens (*Impatiens walleriana*) this season. The good news is that we have so many great alternatives, including New Guinea impatiens (*Impatiens hawkeri*), that can perform beautifully where we used to grow regular impatiens.

We will discuss many alternatives in this special **three-part series**. Explore the second part below and you’ll see that this disease has created an opportunity for gardeners to try several interesting and potentially rewarding candidates.
appleblossom, and several others. They are extra happy in a well-drained potting soil but will also grow in the ground in beds. There is a bronze-leaved series called ‘Mocca’ that is identical to the ‘Nonstops’ except for its darker, brownish foliage. For a trailing series, try ‘Illumination,’ whose mostly double flowers cascade from arching plants. These are perfect for hanging baskets or containers-alone or in combination with other shade lovers. There are many individual colors and some exceptional bicolor varieties such as ‘Peaches & Cream’ and ‘Golden Picotee.’ Keep the soil slightly moist and fertilize through the summer.

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**Begonia boliviensis.** During the last several years, begonia breeding has produced several outstanding cultivars whose lineage originates from the Bolivian begonia. Most of these are trailing, may have single to fully double flowers, and usually thrive in either shade or full sun. ‘Bonfire,’ with its single orange flowers, was the first Bolivian begonia to become popular. We now have the ‘Waterfall’ series, whose more attractive foliage, single to double flowers, and broad color range has made this the most popular series in the U.S. Look for other great-performing Bolivian begonia series such as ‘Sparkler,’ ‘Bon Bon,’ ‘Million Kisses,’ ‘Beaucoup,’ and ‘Crackling Fire.’

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Lobelia is available in seed-grown flats or vegetatively-grown pots. The seed-grown varieties decline rapidly as temperatures increase. By summer they are usually quite brown and inevitably discarded. However, the vegetatively-grown varieties have much better heat tolerance, especially when protected from midday sun. They have a mound-to-trailing habit and come in shades of blue, white, and pink. The most heat-tolerant ones are the ‘Hot’ series and the ‘Techno’ series. Being that they are not grown from seed, they are significantly more expensive than impatiens.

Wishbone flower (Torenia) is available in seed-grown flats or vegetatively-grown pots. The seed-grown varieties include a relatively new series called ‘Kauai,’ whose performance in numerous field trials has been exceptional. This series offers more compact plants with superior branching in seven colors and a mixture. Choose from pinks, purples, blues, and whites. They form tight mounds 8 to 10 inches tall and wide that thrive in shade or partial shade.

The vegetatively-propagated cultivars come in similar colors and thrive in shade to nearly full sun. The big difference is that these torenia have a trailing habit. They are great in hanging baskets or as a groundcover. They look great planted under red or pink Dragon Wing begonias.

Vinca (periwinkle). Where some sun is available, this seed-grown bedding plant will thrive. As little as four hours of full sun will sustain good growth; even unobstructed northern exposure will suffice. Vincas prefer acidic, well-drained soil that’s high in organic matter. They also prefer to be grown warm, so planting them too early in the spring could prove detrimental. They have a mounding growth habit and come in a broad range of colors. Today’s varieties have overlapping petals and extra large flowers that strongly resemble impatiens. Where enough light is available, this is an economically practical impatiens alternative.

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