



Getting Savvy About Tags

Spring Meadow Nursery is trying to change the way gardeners think about flowering shrubs. With a pull-through marketing technique and attractive, self-selling tags, consumers, retailers and growers are taking notice, even if they don't produce woodies.

By Brandi D. Thomas



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There's been much ado about annual and perennial marketing these days, from P. Allen Smith representing the Flower Fields to Proven Winners' Pikmin and partnership with The Weather Channel. It would appear that every gardening application the consumer needs to know about has been covered, from bedding plants, to fall plantings, to container gardens...except for one thing. Can you hear that sound? That's the sound of money in a consumer's pocket as she leaves the garden center — that's the sound of plants that you grew but your customer couldn't sell.

A recent statistic says that 78 percent of consumers only enter the color portion of the garden center, where they find annuals and a few perennials. No problem, right? The majority of your product is right there. Wrong. This way of thinking is going to send you the way of the dinosaurs. The more your customer sells, regardless of what department it comes from, the more able they are to expand and buy more product from you.

Realizing this interdependence between departments, Spring Meadow Nursery Inc., Grand Haven, Mich., is introducing a new tag that devotes valuable space to selling plants they don't grow.

MARKETING TIMES THREE

Aware of the void in good marketing for trees and flowering shrubs, Spring Meadow Nursery developed ColorChoice, a program for introducing new plants to the marketplace that integrates the widespread marketing of these new introductions and a tagging support program that features colorful photography and usage information. The tags drive consumers back to the colorchoiceplants.com Web site for plant care information, where they can also view other Spring Meadow plants and find out which retailers in their state carry the plants. Tags for the complete product line were launched in 2002. "We saw offering tags to the product line as a way to fill a void, and the ultimate goal is it will increase sales," said Steve VanderWoude, licensing director for Spring Meadow.

Using a three-pronged advertising approach, Spring Meadow is attempting to attract the attention of all parts of the production/consumption chain. They've published advertisements in industry trade magazines for wholesale growers; in magazines such as

GPN's sister publication, *Lawn & Garden Retailer*, for retailers; and in consumer magazines such as *Garden Showcase*. The objective is pull-through marketing: to encourage consumers to ask their retailers to start stocking the plants they see in magazines, to prompt retailers to put in orders with Spring Meadow growers, to enthuse growers enough about the product that they will buy more plant material and persuade retailers to place orders for it.

VanderWoude considers garden writers to be a great vehicle for publicizing the ColorChoice program. Spring Meadow gives out 300-500 plants each year to garden writers to encourage them to write articles about the plants. "We did a piece ♦



Above right: ColorChoice tags direct consumers to the colorchoiceplants.com Web site for care information; Above left: Spring Meadow offers postcards, like this one for 'Black Beauty', which can be modified and reprinted to suit customers' needs.

containers, tags & labels



this year on ‘Wine & Roses™’ and it got picked up by over 130 newspapers across the country, 50 of the top 100 markets, reaching 3.8 million consumers,” VanderWoude said. “To me, that’s pull-through marketing.”

THE POWER OF A TAG

Though the ColorChoice program dates back nearly six years now, Spring Meadow recently revised its tagging program to reflect the industry’s needs and to add more sales-friendly features. What was once a long strip tag that attached to the plants via adhesive and folded around them got a facelift this past June — the new, rectangular tags now attach with a string and feature seven, easily identifiable icons on the fronts for consumer reference: sun, part shade, shade, attracts butterflies, attracts hummingbirds, fragrant and cut flowers. The backs of the tags feature bulleted characteristics of each plant, as well as facts about exposure, season of interest, hardiness and size.

One of the best features of the new tags is a suggestive selling component Spring Meadow calls Perfect Pairs: other plants that will complement the current selection. “My thought process with Perfect Pairs is that the consumer needs

some direction,” said VanderWoude. “It could become part of a whole merchandising program for the retailer, who could create an endcap with some of the combinations. My goal was to give consumers a couple of ideas of what to pair with this plant so they’ll go buy another one.” For example, one of the Perfect Pairs listed for Wine & Roses™ is *Rudbeckia hirta*.

Spring Meadow sells more than 400 varieties of flowering shrubs to wholesale growers in 49 states, and boasts slightly more than 3,000 customers. Growers pay, on average, a \$0.38 royalty on each plant purchased from Spring Meadow, which includes the cost of the tag; Spring Meadow requires its growers to apply the tags as part of the licensing agreement. Some licensees, like Monrovia, have been approved to use their own tags, while non-licensed growers who buy individual liners must use the ColorChoice tags. Spring Meadow

channels 30 percent of its royalty cost back into marketing. What’s unique about Spring Meadow’s program is that an additional 30 percent of the royalty cost goes back into the program, for such purposes as identifying new plants for the ColorChoice line.

While the program is geared toward independent garden centers, Spring Meadow does not tell its licensees that they cannot sell to mass merchandisers — and to that end, VanderWoude has seen Wine & Roses™ at Lowes. This does not mean, however, that independents do not have the opportunity to make a premium on these plants. The challenge, according to VanderWoude, is getting growers and retailers to understand that this program is made for independent businesses. “You can sell them for more money because they are premium plants, and the opportunity is really in the first 3-5 years,” he explained. “Get in, promote it, market it, merchandise it — it’s going to yield benefits to you.”

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PERFORMANCE WORTH MERCHANDISING

Spring Meadow’s goal is not to flood the market with a dizzying array of new flowering shrubs, but to provide consumers with unique plants that are guaranteed to perform and with adequate marketing and tagging to support them. They have accomplished this through trialing. Three acres of display gardens on Spring Meadow’s property showcase well over 800-1,000 varieties of plants; by comparison, there are only 43 new additions to the company catalog this year. Tim Wood, horticulturist and product development manager, and Dale Deppe, owner, travel the world in search of new plants, including Korea, Belgium, England and The Netherlands. For a variety to be selected, it must be something different than what’s currently available on the market, and it must evoke excitement in the consumer. It must also show good form, flower for a relatively long period of time and be attractive and “sellable”

even when not in bloom, among other judging factors. Spring Meadow invites all of its licensees to come visit the nursery as often as they please, for two reasons. “First, it gives them the chance to get an idea of what we may introduce in the next couple of years,” said VanderWoude. “And second, it gives us an opportunity to get feedback from them.” VanderWoude has visions for the way he’d like retailers to merchandise ColorChoice plants, visions that he believes could help them sell more. How? First, he suggests that we stop the segregation of plant categories and think more in terms of cross-merchandising. “There’s almost nobody in the country integrating shrubs and perennials,” VanderWoude said. “I think as long as we maintain these double yellow lines between departments, it only increases the confusion for the consumer. Imagine a garden center that has delineated sun and shade [departments], and plants that can

be grown in both areas are located in both areas. Maybe there’s a nice, weeping red Japanese maple positioned on the bench or on an endcap display, wrapped with hostas and whatever else. Right now we sell all the Japanese maples out in the tree lot in full sun, and so we, in essence, increase the amount of information our staff must share, while reducing the ability to sell plants because we make it more confusing.” It doesn’t have to be confusing with the right merchandising. Spring Meadow has provided the tools with tags and is driving demand through advertising — with some effort, the potential to maximize your sales is in your hands. 

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