

INTRODUCING EXOTIC PLANTS TO THE U.S. MARKET

UNBEKNOWNST TO MOST CONSUMERS, MANY OF THE PLANTS THEY BUY ARE NATIVE TO A LAND HALF A WORLD AWAY. SO HOW DO THESE PLANTS MAKE THEIR WAY HERE, AND WHAT DOES THEIR JOURNEY ENTAIL? **By Joseph C. Roberts**



Sitting in the store next to a few dozen other tropical plants is an aglaonema with a striking red and pink variegation throughout its leaves. The color and texture is foreign to many of the people who walk by, which is not surprising. That's because this plant, and others like it, are native to a land half a world away. To get to this shelf at this store, the colored aglaonema underwent a journey that spanned over 10,000 miles and more than seven years. The adventure for this particular tropical plant, aglaonema Jazzed Gem, began when two men from Florida decided to take a plane ride.

It's May 2004 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. David Kirwan and Joe Roberts of ForemostCo Inc. have been in the country for a few days exploring the cities and jungles. They were on a mission to find new and exciting tropical plants to introduce to the U.S. market. When the two were first introduced to what would eventually become the Jazzed Gem series, they were merely trying to purchase eight plants from a few Thai breeders. The first challenge was simply obtaining the plants. As was made clear to them by one of the breeders, if a Sultan recently bought a single plant for one million dollars, then to purchase eight plants it was going to cost them! But, as it turned out, a little bit of negotiation goes a long way and eventually the two were able to purchase

eight beautiful colored ags. Now they just had to figure out how to develop a viable program in the United States with a handful of plants they bought in Thailand. With only one of each variety it was going to be a challenge to build up a stock program. And then there was the risk of the plant dying before it could be further propagated.

Importing Live Plant Material

First things first, get the plants to the United States. Anyone who has imported live goods into the States will tell you this is no simple feat. The USDA and other agencies are very careful in what they'll allow into the country to make sure no potentially dangerous flora or fauna reach our shores. For example, in general, no living plant material is allowed into the States that is potted in media. Now as with anything in this world there are exceptions, but for the most part, that rule is held firm!

In late May 2004 with proper paperwork in hand, the ags, with washed roots, were able to make their way to the United States and to Phoenix Foliage, a nursery in Winter Garden, Fla. There, the two had to figure out how to grow and propagate these things.

Learning the Plant's Culture

For the next three years, the ags were grown, propagated and studied to determine

'Jazzed Gem Etta Rose'



'Jazzed Gem Emerald Holiday'

a tissue culture plant in China, a farm in Guatemala or any number of other locations, the production of stock material for the U.S. market is, without doubt, a global industry. In the case of the Jazzed Gems, they were destined for a farm in Costa Rica where the ags would be further expanded under poly greenhouses until the numbers reached a commercially

viable point. From the beginning of this adventure David and Joe knew they wanted to send the plants to Costa Rica in order to expand a stock from which vegetative cuttings could be taken. So Phoenix Foliage sent a few thousand plants of the eight varieties down to a farm outside of the town of Siquirres.



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their market potential. To be a commercially viable product many pieces have to fall in place. Of course it has to be an interesting plant the public would be willing to buy, but more than that it had to meet a number of requirements. Could the ags be propagated at a reasonable rate? Would they root easily enough that the plant could fit into a commercial growers program? Were they disease resistant or prone? How long did they take to grow? Would the plants travel well as cuttings, liners and finished pots? What was their shelf life in the stores? How difficult was it for the consumer to care for them? These are just a few of the questions most growers of new varieties need to consider before beginning a program.

Expanding Stock

In 2007, it was finally decided to pull the trigger. Phoenix Foliage felt comfortable growing the ags and there were finally enough stock plants to send to the next destination: Costa Rica.

Much of the finished tropical foliage sold in stores around the United States is grown and finished within the States, but a lot of the starter material used for those plants isn't necessarily from a domestic origin. Whether product arrives from



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In Costa Rica there were additional challenges to overcome. Poly roofs had to be built to spare the ags from the oppressive rainy season. The differences in location such as temperature, altitude, light levels, etc. all affected the growing habits of the stock plants. It's no surprise that the farm in Costa Rica, OSV, had to relearn how to grow

the plants even with all the input and research done by Phoenix Foliage: new location, new obstacles.

In 2008, the farm was finally shipping the first trials back into the United States. Now it was time to figure out how best to cut and ship the plants. Should they be shipped as unrooted cuttings, calloused cuttings, rooted?

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'Jazzed Gem Ruby Ray'

What size was the best size to maximize shipping efficiency while maintaining a product that will grow well in a U.S. nursery? Nothing is ever easy it seems. And if it is, you may want to make sure you're doing it right.


Into the U.S. Market

Through trial and error, communication with the U.S. growers, and a little bit of luck, by 2010 a significant numbers of Jazzed Gem cuttings were being shipped out of Costa Rica and into the hands of commercial growers throughout the United States.

As of today, David, Joe, and the folks at Phoenix Foliage and OSV are still learning more efficient ways to produce and ship the Jazzed Gems. The stock in Costa Rica continues to expand, and the demand is increasing.

Back at the store, the aglaonema Jazzed Gem is ready for the customer with all its pinks and reds and greens. And this foliage plant is not alone. The spathiphyllum sitting next to it or the dracaena on the other side of the store also have their own stories to tell. This one is merely a single example of some of the fascinating challenges faced within the tropical foliage industry. Unlike some other specialties within the horticulture industry, it can take years before a new crop is ready for commercial production. While some may believe this to be a burden, it

'Jazzed Gem Sparkling Sarah'

is rather, in this author's opinion, a blessing. When something as simple as developing a new aglaonema program for market creates an adventure that spans across continents, you know you're in an industry like no other! There is no doubt that challenges abound. To produce thousands, tens of thousands, or millions of cuttings, it will take time, and a lot of it. And that's not a bad thing. When someone goes into their local store and sees a tropical foliage plant, we want them to be transported to a beach in the Florida Keys, an island in Southeast Asia or a rainforest in the Amazon. While we may not be able to send our customers to exotic destinations around the world, with a little hard work we can continue to bring a little bit of the exotic to everyone's home. 

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