



# The Will of Seville

Way cool and far out, we dug Seville Farms' pansy marketing program enough to name them the honorable mention for the 2002 Marketing Innovation Award.

By Brandi D. Thomas



Ask any flower and plant retailer to describe their customer base, and the answer will likely range from a middle-aged wife and mother complete with young children and minivan, to a female retiree who comes in every Tuesday for her senior discount. From the 35-50-plus range, give or take a few gray hairs, that's probably what they'll say. To appeal to the aura of that consumer group, a marketing manager might think in terms of muted colors and traditional images, like country geese and apple pie.

But not Dave Johnson. Seville Farms' vice president of marketing is a cautious creative; while slow to implement grower branding, Johnson knew who he wanted Seville's customers to be and took his time observing consumer demographics before he made his move. He had his sights set on national retailers, and he had a sneaking suspicion that the primary gardening consumer at those stores was neither a dowdy divorcee in her 40s nor a mother with kids in tow. "I have a running opinion that our consumer base in the Southwest [including Texas, Okla., La. and N.M.] is not as we have perceived it to be in the mid-40s and older, but in the mid-30s and getting younger."

## MAKING HORTICULTURE HIP

The most recent study on consumer floral buying habits conducted by the American Floral Endowment and Ipsos-NPD backs up Johnson's observation (See the June issue of sister publication *Lawn & Garden Retailer* for complete details). While only seven percent of respondent bedding plant buyers at independent garden centers were under 35 years, 17 percent of shoppers at home centers and 14 percent at discount chains were in that lower age range.

One year ago, when Seville launched its pansy blends program, Johnson didn't have any tangible proof that the image created would be in tune with its targeted younger buyers. All he had were his eyes and a gut feeling. "Some of my staff wanted me to use things like 'Sunset Blend' and 'Apple Orchard Blend' and 'Cider Box Blend', and I said no, I don't want that. I want something that just leaps out, that maybe grabs a different eye. I'm still sold on [the younger demographic], and I'm going to continue to be sold on it because when I go into national retailers, that's who I see shopping."

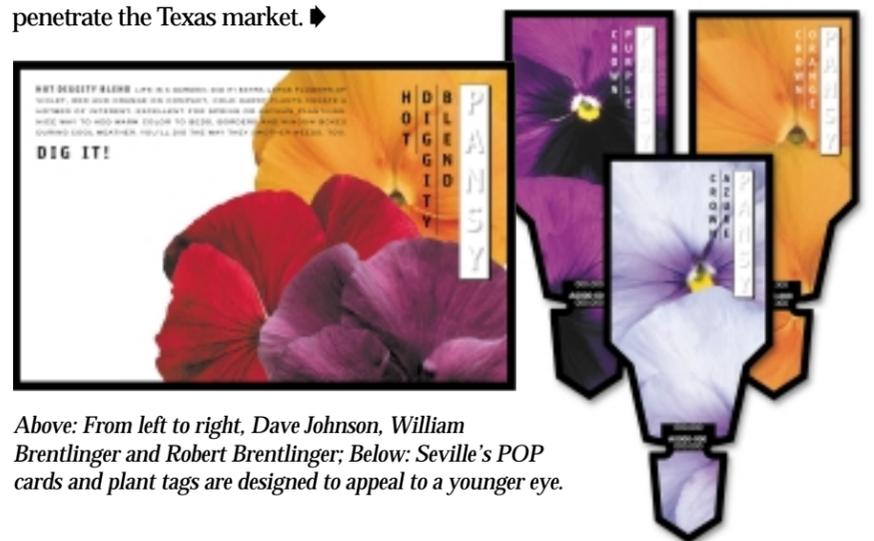
That said, Johnson's objective is not only to appeal to younger customers, he wants Seville's program to appeal to everyone. He likens his vision for their marketing program to the readers who turn the pages of *Martha Stewart Living*. "Who reads *Martha Stewart*?" he asks. "Maybe everyone from 19-99, but there's a sector out there that reads *Martha Stewart* more than others. Who reads *Sunset*? Again, that's a different age sector. I want to have something for the entire spectrum."

While 2001 marked the initial year of the program, it had already been in development for about 24 months prior to this in plant trials. Johnson had

experience managing pansy selections for some of his high-end customers, including the Ft. Worth Botanic Center and Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas, with much success. Seeing this, Lowe's gave Seville the opportunity to expand, provided that it could develop a good tagging program with POP materials to complement it. With MasterTag's help on the color schemes and graphics, Seville created a program that so impressed Lowe's they requested an exclusivity agreement for the Southwest region. The home improvement giant then designated Seville's program as its feature catalogue item for October 2001.

When Lowe's customers opened up their flyers, they didn't see just a stock picture of pansies, they saw Seville's three carefully chosen blends and clever signage. Using Sakata's Crown varieties, Seville's pansy palette became "Hot Diggity" (Crown Purple, Orange and Scarlet), "Groovy Gold" (Crown Scarlet, Cream and Gold) and "Way Cool" (Crown Blue, Azure and White). They produce the finished blends in 12-inch color bowls and 8-inch terra cotta pots, and single colors in 4.5-inch pots. The program generated \$300,000 of new business for Seville in 2001, and it could have been more — demand turned out to be much more than projected selling expectations. This year, the program is booked at over \$540,000, with the introduction of two new blends, and Seville is producing extra product in anticipation of approximately \$600,000 each year.

Aside from its business with Lowe's, Seville also markets heavily to Home Depot, Wal-Mart, a large supermarket chain in Texas and landscape contractors John Deere Landscape and Tru-Green. Home Depot was its first customer when Seville was founded in 1993; at that time, Home Depot did not have a good supplier in the Southwest region, so Seville was able to meet the DIY retailer's needs. Nine months later, Wal-Mart also signed on. Lowe's became a customer in 1997 when it was starting to penetrate the Texas market. ▶



Above: From left to right, Dave Johnson, William Brentlinger and Robert Brentlinger; Below: Seville's POP cards and plant tags are designed to appeal to a younger eye.

Johnson, along with Billy and Bobby Brentlinger and George Sumner, are Seville's principals. All four of them have a growing background; Johnson was a sales representative for a large, corporate nursery in San Antonio, and the Brentlingers owned their own wholesale nursery in Mansfield, Texas, prior to pioneering Seville. In January 2001, they started another company: Integrated Botanics, which sells plugs and liners nationwide through various brokerage networks. Seville is one of Integrated Botanics' primary customers.

**INVESTING IN INPUT**

Because Seville does not have in-store merchandisers to look after its product, it channels its efforts into what it can control — not just innovative marketing materials, but the quality inputs needed to create an exceptional end product. "From the very beginning of the purchasing process," Johnson explains, "we insist on an outstanding-quality plug or liner product. We are sold on our potting mix based on its production quality. One thing I'm particularly sold on is its shelf-life after it leaves our facility. I don't see enough growers looking at products from that standpoint."

Of course there is always the risk, when you aren't in complete control, that your plants will not get enough water or will get too much sun. When this is the case, choosing varieties that are more forgiving in the face of inadequate care is crucial. "What we have to do is make sure we're using the products that can snap back if they dry out, and drain well if they're being watered overnight. Products that are not particularly susceptible to pathogens," Johnson says.

Johnson tries to stay abreast of the newest and most resilient varieties on the

market by attending the California Pack Trials every year. (For *GPN's* extensive coverage of the 2002 Trials, turn to page 44.) "This was a particularly strong year for new pansy development, and I've already bought a significant amount of seed to put us in a proprietary position," he says. Seville's customers recognize the company's constant efforts to deliver quality, a factor that has helped foster excellent relationships between Seville and its regional buyers and corporate offices.

**FUTURE EXPANSION**

Seville recently purchased a 200,000-sq.-ft. production facility from John Deere Landscape, which will increase its production capabilities from 500,000 to 700,000 sq. ft. Its aim is to expand its vendor base into additional landscape contractors and wholesalers to the contractors, supplying these vendors with pansy blends. Seville is also augmenting its national retailer customer base: In 2003, it will have markets in Kansas, Missouri and Mississippi. Johnson also sees the possibility of expanding Seville's marketing program to encompass plant varieties other than pansies, as well as creating further blend options that use varieties other than Crowns.

All fingers point to success with this expansion — especially those of the consumers who've been buying Seville's plants. "I can walk into Wolf Camera wearing a shirt with the Seville Farms logo, and the professional helping me at the counter will say, 'I buy your plants at Lowe's and Home Depot all the time!'" Johnson says. "We're becoming a consumer brand in the Southwest, and that's a compliment to us." GPN

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