

Becoming Consumer-centric



Bridget White, Editor
(847) 391-1004 • bwwhite@sgcmail.com

next month...

- Jim Barrett's research on PGRs for calibrachoa
- Ann Chase explores the ups and downs of generic fungicides
- Jim Faust updates Bonzi/Cycocel tank mix usage
- Drought coverage continues with methods for reclaiming irrigation water

plus...

- Marketing Innovation Award runner-up
- More varieties from the Pack Trials
- Proper primula production
- Planning and scheduling bulb crops

You might be wondering what's going on here at *GPN* that we have a dinner party on the cover of the magazine. Just bear with me for a few minutes, and everything will be clear...

A couple of months ago during my Pack Trial tour at Proven Winners (see pages 24 and 100 for part one of our coverage), Director of Promotions and Product Development John Gaydos asked a question that plagued me the remainder of the week and has been on my mind since.

He pointed to five colorful, distinct *Bracteantha* varieties and asked if I thought the market could support another variety. Our eventual consensus was not could it but would it. Let me explain.

I loved gardening before I became part of this industry, but back then, a trip to the garden center was a different experience. I walked around amazed at all the beautiful plants, trying to decide which of the offerings I needed for my garden. Now, I walk in looking for a particular variety — because research has shown that *x verbena* has better mildew resistance or that *y impatiens* can take more sun — and I am inevitably disappointed, as even the best garden centers never have all of the varieties I want. Which brings me back to the question: *would* the market support more varieties?

My very scientific "gut" feeling is yes. When officemates get a glimpse of the annual seed catalogues that are packed with plants and varieties they've never seen, the ones that you and I take for granted, they go crazy. I hear over and over, "Where can I buy this?" They ask me to write down the variety name so they can ask for it at their garden center. Chances are, they'll be disappointed.

So would a new *Bracteantha* make these gardeners happy? It's hard to say in light of the fact that half of what's already available never makes it to the end consumer. We can't keep turning to the breeders for new introductions to make gardeners happy when over half of what they already offer never sees a retail bench. Example, there are easily 100 pansy varieties on the market, and when you include panolas and violas, the number becomes staggering.

How many of those make it to retail? Is it because the consumer won't buy them? No, the pansy market has shown double-digit growth for years. Is it because we need another new intro-


duction? No, new colors or habit improvements are always welcome, and always coming, but the core was in place a long time ago. The only reasonable solution is that growers aren't making the varieties available.

THE CHALLENGE

Folks, you're clogging things up. Breeders put plenty of new varieties into the system, and consumers lap up anything that they've never seen before. The bottleneck is right here with the growers. I'm not advising you to add something to your line just because it's new. Why make yourself learn how to grow a new variety if it doesn't offer some return either in growing ease or price point. The breeders are doing their part. Look at PanAmerican's new Easy Wave (culture information on page 104) as an example. The Wave is a great seller at retail, and PanAmerican has made it easier for you to grow by improving its bench performance.

So, here's your challenge: You've got to start thinking more about the consumer. What does the consumer want? How much of it do they want? How much will they pay for it? How can you make them want your plants?

That's what this year's *GPN*/MasterTag Marketing Innovation Award winner did four years ago, and now they're on the verge of taking their idea national. Deena Altman, Altman Plants, Vista, Calif., considered the industry's sagging herb sales and wondered what she could do to make consumers want to buy more herbs — how she could make it easy for them. What resulted is a marketing program based on usage, an award-winning promotional campaign and the June cover article. I immediately loved this picture because it is a graphic representation of Altman's motivation — consumer use. (Does it make sense now?)

Before anything as progressive as marketing campaigns or awards can happen, you've got to get more in line with the consumer. So here's what I'm really asking you to do: Trial at least five new crops and 10 new varieties each year. Determine what would benefit your operation, what's easiest to grow, what requires less chemicals, what you can make more money with, and make those varieties part of your offerings. You'll definitely see the return once the consumers see all the different plants you can offer. 

Bridget C. White