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# CROSSING BOUNDARIES

A new Proven Winners marketing partnership breaks all traditional rules by pairing bedding plants and woodies. This exclusive interview relays all the details and implications for the industry.

BY BRIDGET WHITE

At last month's Mid-Am trade show in Chicago, Proven Winners (PW) and Spring Meadow Nursery, a supplier of unique woody ornamentals sold under the ColorChoice label, announced an exclusive marketing partnership that flies in the face of industry tradition.

According to the agreement, PW has licensed Spring Meadow to market woody plants under the Proven Winners and Proven Selections brands across North America. The exclusive partnership will result in all current and future ColorChoice varieties being marketed under the Proven Winners brand as "Proven Winners ColorChoice" plants. Additionally, a select group of premium, non-ColorChoice varieties from Spring Meadow will be sold under PW's Proven Selections brand. Spring Meadow and its licensed grower network will continue to grow and sell ColorChoice varieties as in the past.

Since both PW and Spring Meadow are dedicated to innovative

marketing and the introduction of unique plant material, the partnership creates tremendous potential for both growers and retailers. We sat down with John Gaydos, director of product development and promotion for Proven Winners, to get the details of the partnership and what that could mean for the industry.

**Bridget: What is the partnership, and what do you think it will mean for the industry?**

**John:** From the wholesale grower level, I don't see that it is really going to have an impact a whole lot for a couple of years. And the reason I say that is because most wholesale growers, whether he/she be a perennial producer, a specialty annual producer or a woody producer, don't cross categories. So I don't think that because we partnered with Spring Meadow, all of a sudden the guy down the street is going to be adding a section of woodies — that won't happen.

Where I do see possibilities for change, and again it's going to take time and work, is at the retail level. The retailer is going to say, "I want this product. Number one because it's a good product and will be great for my customer, and number two because it's the kind of product that is going to have an additional profit margin for me." Hopefully, this partnership will allow retailers to group products together that naturally should be displayed together; unfortunately, it will not occur overnight. But what brought this whole program together was a desire to get retailers to market products the way today's consumers shop.

**Bridget: Such as these are products for container gardens, these are products for the sun, and for the shade...**

**John:** Absolutely. And what this will probably mean at retail is that



*The purpose of the partnership is to encourage garden centers to market woodies and color together, as shown here. (Photo courtesy of Proven Winners)*

you might have a product that is displayed in three different places. Retailers will be putting all container plants together; and they will be putting woodies, perennials, annuals and specialty annuals together for sun and shade; but they'll still have plants displayed alphabetically, with woodies in the woody section and perennials with the perennials. Ours would be a specialty display, and the product would actually end up displayed in multiple places.

**Bridget: Why do you think it is important for retailers to start selling product in that way, and what are PW and Spring Meadow going to do to facilitate that?**

**John:** Consumers only have a limited amount of time to shop. As much as we would love to say it is wonderful and a breath of fresh air to go shopping in a nursery or in a greenhouse, that's not the case. The consumer still only has X number of minutes that she can shop, and those minutes are getting shorter. More and more, she doesn't have



time to spend three hours walking around in a nursery in the middle of May. So the time constraints are very, very tight and getting tighter, so let's layout the retail like a customer shops — "I want to have this garden planted in a weekend, and it's going to go in the shade." Boom, everything that she should have could be right in one spot. And I think we can help put together some designs, programs and educational opportunities to show retailers that it works. And we'll start doing that at the OFA Short Course, if not before. One of our displays in Columbus will focus on bringing the products together, and Spring



*John Gaydos, director of product development and promotion, Proven Winners.*

industry issues

Meadow will have its open house this summer focusing on putting together retail displays that make sense for the customer.

**Bridget:** PW is known for its marketing, both to the trade as well as the consumer. How will this new

product line tap into that expertise? What kind of marketing support will be behind it?

**John:** We will be putting the same amount of emphasis on the Spring Meadow ColorChoice line as we do anything else we grow

and market. Even though we are not going to be involved in the production of this item, we are going to focus on bringing it all together. We will put together marketing programs, some recipes for containers or gardens, POP, etc.

**Bridget:** Will the ColorChoice line be featured in advertisements?

**John:** What makes this such a strong relationship is that the Proven Winners marketing program will be expanded to show ColorChoice material; however, the individual ColorChoice varieties will continue to be marketed by Spring Meadow.

**Bridget:** So PW will be selling more of a concept, with Spring Meadow selling the specifics as they relate to woodies.

**John:** Right. What we'll do is expose the customer to Proven Winners' entire product line. Together, Spring Meadow and Proven Winners will do a lot of neat things to promote the partnership, such as work with garden writers. Proven Winners has kind of taken the lead in marketing to master gardeners, and we will certainly use our relationship with Spring Meadow to expose more master gardeners to these products. Additionally, we'll be able to use all the national gardening magazines and talk shows to gain exposure and create interest and demand.

**Bridget:** You did bring up a really interesting question that makes the partnership a little strange to me. PW was started by a conglomerate of liner producers; you are their marketing arm to generate interest in the liners they produce. Why would you add a product, namely woody ornamentals, that you are not growing?

**John:** Yes, it does seem weird, but remember that we also market fertilizers that we don't produce. We were involved with the formulation and are involved with marketing, but we do not actually sell the product. It is not just about the plants; it's about building a relationship with customers.

**Bridget:** What's going to keep these plants from being stuck in the back of the garden center with a dirty PW tag hanging off of them?

**John:** I would love to say that it will never happen. I hope that because of PW's retailing message and us preaching and a few quality retailers in North America understanding the profit potential and the marketing potential of merchandising this way, these Proven Winners' ColorChoice plants will be quite visible.



**Bridget:** So instead of just a bunch of us dreaming about what could happen, having the marketing partnership gives you a platform to actually go to the industry and discuss this idea of a new way to use, as well as merchandize, plant products?

**John:** That's right. When I look at where we are today with Proven Winners and our educational arm, which influences most of our marketing activities — helping people realize the potential of their operation and their own marketing options — I'm really proud and pleased to have Spring Meadow as part of this because we have the same message: how to grow and sell plants.

Most of us are agriculturalists; we are not marketing people, and it takes us a long time to *see* something like this. For years we thought just plant it, and it will sell. That's not the case anymore. There are too many other operations that are offering products at prices less than profitable for the independents. The independents have got to differentiate themselves from some of these larger merchants, and I think they can do it through display and through product selection, and they will make money at it.

**Bridget:** We've talked a lot about what this partnership will mean for retailers and not too much about growers. Do you see this partnership helping growers cross plant categories?

**John:** Yes. There are a lot of items that have wonderful color but are classified as woodies, and that terminology strikes fear into greenhouse growers. Like, "I don't know how to grow weigelia." But there are a lot of products that would do quite well in containers, can be grown quickly, would fit the greenhouse production timeframe and could be sold at a substantial margin. We just have to identify what products will and what won't fit that scheme.

**Bridget:** And will that information be forthcoming in the next few years? An identified segment of the ColorChoice line that's marketed directly to greenhouse growers?

**John:** Yes. We have been working on that list, and in fact, in the upcoming trials I hope you will see products that are planted together.

**Bridget:** And how would you fit

those crops into a standard greenhouse production?

**John:** Some of these plants grow faster than expected, and they don't have to be in a 3-gal. container. They could be easily grown in a 5-inch pot on a quick timetable.

Obviously not all woodies will fit in that scenario, but some will. I think the nice thing is that both of our product lines are diverse enough to give options to lots of people.

**Bridget:** Are you talking about crops that are simply fast growing

or about a premium or oversized liner that is prevernalized or whatever needs to happen to make it fit into the 2- to 3-month production cycle?

**John:** Definitely there are some select items where the liner will be ►

## industry issues

premium and will fit in the greenhouse schedule. It may be vernalized; it most probably won't be a liner that was stuck in January and shipped in February. That doesn't happen with these crops. But they will come in a liner format, perhaps a little bit larger than an 82, and will be able to fit into a combination and finished right alongside with Supertunias or Superbenas.

**Bridget: Are those available now?**

**John:** Yes, but they are not marketed as such.

**Bridget: And interested growers would contact Spring Meadow for liners?**

**John:** Right now, marketing of the Spring Meadow ColorChoice program is done through Spring Meadow and their licensees. They have 83 licensees that are licensed

to produce stock and sell product; some of them sell liners. Spring Meadow will put interested growers in touch with people who have liners available right now or who can produce some liners. You could also look for suppliers on the Web sites: [www.springmeadownursery.com](http://www.springmeadownursery.com) and [www.colorchoiceplants.com](http://www.colorchoiceplants.com). 

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