

Creative Marketing Award

A Friendly Marketer

The Florida Friendly Plants program has changed the way mass merchandisers deal with growers.

By Carrie Burns



Rick (left) and Dave (right) Brown have changed the way consumers do their Home Depot shopping. Opposite page: The Florida Friendly Plants display is shopper friendly and eye catching. (Photos courtesy of Jim Barrett)

For the first annual GPN/John Henry Company Creative Marketing Award, we wanted to really make a statement — one that says “Now this is a successful marketing program.” And that is why I am so excited to announce that Riverview Flower Farm, Riverview, Fla., is the 2005 winner for its Florida Friendly Plants program. You will see in the next few pages just why this program is such a winner.

THE COMPANY

Brothers Rick and Dave Brown, owners of Riverview, began the business after transforming the large Florida vegetable plug producer where they had been working into an operation more focused on ornamentals. After such a successful transformation, they decided it was time to start their own place. And so, in 1982, Riverview Flower Farm was born. Back then it was just a 3-acre operation producing 4-inch annuals, garden mums and poinsettias for local independents. Now, Riverview with more than 30 acres of production, is one of the largest green goods suppliers to Home Depot stores throughout Florida. “We are nearing 30 million units sold under Florida Friendly Plants, which we offer exclusively to the 112 Home Depots we service in Florida’s climate Zones 9 and 10,” said Rick.

“Here in central Florida, many of the new patented vegetative annuals perform as perennials,” said Rick. “We also stock traditional Florida perennials like lantana, pentas, Mexican petunia and milkweed in job-lot quantities. Landscapers can load up dependable and easily recognized perennials from our tables to finish their projects or install instant butterfly gardens for their clients.”

Producing high-quality plants has always been a top priority for Riverview. Rick and Dave have turned over the growing decisions to a strong team of growers and assistants. Head grower

The Award

You may have noticed something different about our marketing award this year. We decided to make quite a few changes — starting with the whole thing. While our new award is still a marketing award, the GPN/John Henry Company Creative Marketing Award focuses solely on one particular commercial greenhouse grower.

We here at GPN and the folks at the John Henry Company see quite a few greenhouses throughout the year, so we have decided to give the award to a grower who is nominated by the GPN staff, John Henry Company or GPN’s Editorial Advisory Board, and then voted on by the GPN staff.

We have also decided to award one winner for its creative program’s successful implementation into the marketplace — whether it be into a mass merchant or an independent garden center. So look out because we’ll be watching you!

Creative Marketing Award



Jeff Lewis has been key in maintaining and improving the high quality standards set by Rick and Dave.

THE PROGRAM

In the late 90s the Browns developed what has become one of the most recognized and successful mass merchant brands in the industry. They started by keeping the tables full of high-quality, good-performing color and Florida native plants. "Even though we still grow a lot of native plants, we're not relying on natives — that's so limiting because there are so many good plants you can grow in Florida," said Rick.

Riverview then matched good product and good service with a very descriptive name. "We were looking for something that said right plant/right place," said Rick. Thus, Florida Friendly Plants was born. Immediately the thought came to mind that this name would limit Riverview's selling region, but Rick and Dave were okay with it, realizing that was their only ambition at the time.

The program started a little differently than most marketing programs in our industry. Instead of throwing a logo onto everything possible, Florida Friendly Plants started with only a tag — that's right, a lone, standard tag. According to Dave, "We conceived of the program about the same time we were trying to develop our own plant tags through Economy Label. After we labeled it we decided it was something we needed to trademark." And so they did; since then, they've been capitalizing on the slogan's popularity by putting it on signs, tags, banners, trucks, etc.

Though the Browns took very slow steps, the program was soon sprinting. "Our goal in 2002 was to expand our 40-store West Florida territory to the Orlando market and add 12 more stores," said Rick. "When we made our pitch to our Home Depot buyer, Cathy Pruitt, she surprised us with the territory we requested and challenged us to bring the same success to the 55 stores in the eastern half of the state." It's pretty safe to say they met their goal.

The retailer has a lot to be happy with also. According to Rick, Florida Friendly Plants vastly outsells the same non-branded product at competing big boxes, which might even be located at the same major intersections.

"Business is up significantly with the new Vendor Managed Inventory program [pay-by-scan] that started here in the Florida Home Depots in February," said Rick. "From our perspective, the Home Depot executives were right in recognizing the opportunities of letting their strong core vendors drive the business. We keep the stores full and fresh. We bring the product to the market when and where it is the most likely to sell. We track the rate of sale and take inventory every day in each of our stores."

The brand sells, but the product has to live up to the name. Plants from other brands are sold under the Florida Friendly Plant brand if they can survive the hot and humid climate. "I've heard John Gaydos at Proven Winners tell a group of people that Riverview Flower Farm is the largest angelonia grower in the country," said Rick. "Angelonia survives here as a perennial. Plectranthus 'Mona Lavender' which bears the Simply Beautiful brand is also an integral part of the program, as it blooms nearly year-round in both sun and shade and is becoming one of the most popular premium varieties we offer."

The brand is successful in selling 1-gal. color at a higher price than competitors in what is one of the lowest price markets in the country. Just how well does it sell? It took Riverview out of one category and put them into another — the higher price point. "Building on the success of the brand allowed us to increase the prices on all of our products. "We try to target the demographics and buying trends of each store. In more affluent neighborhoods we can significantly increase dollars per square foot by stocking higher priced premium annuals and premium perennials on the limited space we have in these stores," said Dave.

Florida Friendly Plants also proves that many marketing programs can exist within one store. VIVA! Herbs and VIVA! Plants, developed by Altman Plants, Vista, Calif., have been a success in Florida Home Depot stores as well. "The two brands are going to co-exist in Florida, so the full advantages of both can be realized," said Rick. ♦ "VIVA!



Depot stores. And since our average customer is older, with many retirees living here, they are spending more than 20 minutes in the garden center. They are in a study mode when they get to our tables. The more information and confidence you can clearly and quickly communicate, the more of your plants they will put in their cart.”

THE EXTRAS

Growers constantly hear, “think of the consumer; the consumer needs to know this; you have to market to the consumer.” Of course that is all so true, but don’t forget about your customer — the retailer. The Florida Friendly Plants program works because Riverview makes sure the retailer has sufficient tools to relay pertinent information to the consumer.

Among the many things this program provides to the retailer (searchable Web site; pre-priced containers with instructions; picture tags; variety signs with images, descriptions, key features, price and SKU; bench wrap featuring the recognizable butterflies and logo; and large planting idea signs) is the Garden Associate Apron Reference Guide, a 36-page pocket-sized guide containing photos and information about Florida Friendly Plants all for employees helping customers.

The guide contains answers to many consumers’ questions, including sun or shade; how big does it grow; is it a Florida native; and does it attract butterflies or hummingbirds. It even includes information the retailer

needs to know, such as the season it is available and what season it is in color. According to Dave, the idea came from Stacy’s Greenhouses, York, S.C. “It has been an overwhelming success,” said Dave. “It has been just amazing how many people use it — from cashiers to all of the store employees. A lot of times, they’ll call up and say, ‘when are we going to get XYZ plant,’ and we’ll say, ‘well look in your Apron Reference Guide.’”

THE FINAL WORDS

Just as the program grew little by little, it is still going forward. The Florida Friendly Plants program recently added ornamental grasses to its mix and has had good sales so far.

Just as any good businessperson should, the Browns are always thinking of new and effective facets to Florida Friendly Plants. Who knows what the next few years will bring? Whatever it may be, I’m sure it will be creative and successful.

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