

Dog Days of Summer



By Roger C. Styer

Man, is it hot and dry here in the Chicago area! Hopefully, by the time you read this we will have received some rain and relief from the heat. We are setting records for days over 90° F and no rain. This summer has been completely opposite of last year, which caused problems for some growers. April and May sales were great, but June was down due to the heat and drought. In my town, we have not totaled 1 inch of rain since Mother's Day!

But this is August, so let's not talk about

spring anymore. I want to focus on summer and fall programs. It's a little late to do anything about summer and maybe fall, but you may be able to salvage something. First, do you even have a summer program, or is it just an extension of spring with the same crops? Second, do you grow or sell anything beyond mums and pansies in the fall? Third, what about growing or putting together bigger mixed containers for summer and fall? You know, not everyone plants things into the ground after June, so why not make it easier for them to switch out their plants or redecorate for summer and fall parties? Color schemes change with the fall season, but does your product mix reflect that change? Or do you still grow a lot of pink and lavender?

WHAT'S UP FOR FALL

Since you are reading this column in August, it must mean the fall season is almost upon us. Or maybe it already is for some of you who have been shipping mums since July.

Mums in July! That just goes to show you that the box stores are desperate for color, which goes back to a summer program. Mums just will not hold up very long during that hot time of year, but stores typically do not have anything new in color. Give them a good summer program, and you can quit growing mums for July sales.

Most growers and stores will offer mums in different sizes, colors and flower types; additionally, pansies and violas are grown extensively in many parts of the country. But what about other crops that can tolerate cool conditions, even frost? I know some growers are now offering dianthus, snaps, ornamental kale and cabbage, stock, nemesia and osteospermum. Put these items into combos and they will sell even better. Proven Winners has a fall color program, and other companies are coming out with fall color programs as well. Start thinking outside the box, and try to expand your product line. Again, I do not like to sell flats in the fall, as it will take too long for many customers to get the fullness of the plants and color before really cold weather sets in. Offer these crops in 4½-inch pots and larger, even to landscapers. Mixed combinations, not just color bowls but also large hanging baskets, can also be sold well into the fall.

With our heat and drought this year, I have a feeling many customers will be looking for a lot of fall color. Watering bans are keeping people's yards brown and also making it difficult to water flowering plants. And the heat will cause the color to fade out quicker this fall. Could be a good year for all sorts of fall color, but are you ready for it? Of course, we still need some rain, but Mother Nature will take care of that, won't she? GPN

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Summer Crops

Abelmoschus	Melampodium
Abutilon	Nierembergia
Alternanthera*	Ornamental Basil
Amaranthus	Ornamental Pepper
<i>Amaranthus caudatus</i> —	Pentas
Love Lies Bleeding	Plectranthus*
Angelonia	Plumbago
<i>Asclepias currasavica</i>	Portulaca
Begonia — Dragon Wing	Purslane
Cat Whiskers	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i> —
Celosia	Athens Blue Spires*
Cleome	<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>
Coleus	Ruellia — Rajun Cajun,
Coreopsis	Ground Hugger*
Cosmos	<i>Salvia coccinea</i> —
Crossandra — Tropic	Lady in Red
Cuphea	<i>Salvia farinacea</i>
Dahlberg Daisy	<i>Salvia leucantha</i>
Dianthus	<i>Salvia splendens</i>
<i>Duranta erecta</i>	Scabiosa*
Dusty Miller	Strobilanthes*
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Sunflower
Evolvulus — Blue Daze	Thunbergia
Gaillardia	Tithonia
Gazania	Torenia
Gomphrena	Turnera*
<i>Graptophyllum pictum</i> *	Verbena*
<i>Hamelia patens</i>	Verbena species —
Hibiscus	Imagination, Sterling Star
Ipomea	Vinca
Lantana — Patriots, others*	<i>Zinnia elegans</i>
Leonotis	<i>Zinnia linearis</i>
Lisianthus	Zinnia — Profusion

*Athen's Select Varieties

SUMMER HEAT PROGRAM

I am a big advocate of a specific summer color program separate from what you do for spring. You can call this program "Beat the Heat" or anything along those lines. Plants should be grown in larger containers, no packs or flats. Container sizes should be no smaller than 4½ inches and ideally 6 or even 8 inches. No small basket sizes either! Larger mixed containers will work. Remember, someone has to water these plants, so make it easy on them by focusing on larger container sizes.

The key to this program is a different crop selection from the spring. There can be some crops that carry over, but emphasize the drought and heat-tolerance of the crops. For those of you way up North, this summer program may make no sense, but then again neither does a fall program, as you get snow too quickly. For everybody else, think about what crops will do well in heat, humidity and/or drought. Go to your local field trials, whether at a university, breeder company or grower, and find out how certain crops hold up to the summer weather. You may be surprised to find out you can grow crops such as dianthus through the heat of the summer.

Examples of some seed and vegetative crops that can be used in a summer program are included in the list to the left. I am not advocating Athens Select varieties, but they have been tested in the heat of Georgia. So you make your own decisions about what to grow. Just grow something that makes sense...and money!