



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

Going Their Own Way

For years now, our industry has been very focused on the mass merchandisers — what they do to price, how much business they drive, which growers they are using and, most recently, what their move to pay-by-scan will mean. It's not that we've forgotten about the independent retailers, just that so much product goes to the box stores. Plus, they're such an easy target!

I guess that's why my trip to New Hampshire in early August was so refreshing...because the two growers I visited were totally independent.

The Rabbit Hole

The first clue that I was entering another world came with the reason for the trip: two area growers were hosting open houses, a pretty unusual happening for growers. Since most business is either from long-term relationships or with box stores, growers don't expect (want?) customers to come out to their places, attend seminars, eat lunch and spend the afternoon.

But for the past few years this is exactly what has been happening at Pleasant View Gardens and D.S. Cole Growers, both located in Loudon, N.H. This year even drew a record 1,100 attendees over Pleasant View's 3-day event; that's more people than some regional conferences can claim.

While the main focus at both Pleasant View and D.S. Cole is liner production, they also have year-round finish businesses that cater exclusively to independents. The owners of each of these facilities have traveled extensively and, aside from being pretty smart guys, know that independents need more from their suppliers than just plants.

Programs Galore

It was no surprise to see Proven Winners headlining Pleasant View's open house. Attendees heard about new varieties, updates

to the marketing program, etc. One of the biggest attractions this year was a make-your-own-mixed-container contest. Attendees were supplied with 4-inch annuals, grasses and perennials and set loose on 18-inch pots full of media. If your message is to get creative, up-sell and blur category lines, and it certainly is at Proven Winners, you couldn't have come up with a better program.

The big surprise of the visit came at D.S. Cole Growers. I always knew owner Doug Cole was one of the sharpest guys in the industry, but some of the ideas he has cooked up for his independents just blew me away. Cole's "houseplant" focus has caused the company to source custom pots from Germany and Australia, create a new addiction for house cats and learn more about succulents than anyone wants to.

Three of the company's major programs are a slow-growing pogonetherum marketed as an alternative to cat grass, ferns in very cool tree fern pots and a collection of unusual succulents. Although my cats loved the bamboo (they mowed it down as soon as I got home), I liked the Pongo Pots collection. The containers are made out of real tree fern trunks and shipped in from Australia. When filled with a rabbit fern or stag fern the look is very unusual...even kind of prehistoric.

Kudos

So yes, both growers get kudos for having great, innovative marketing programs and for being forward thinking enough to hold open houses for their customers, but mainly, Pleasant View Gardens and D.S. Cole Growers earned my respect for doing business their own way.

It's not easy to be a large grower in our industry and do business with independent retailers instead of mass merchants. And this, more than anything else I saw that day in August, is something I think many of us can learn from. **GPN**

Bridget E. White



Top: Pongo Pots from D.S. Cole Growers features ferns in tree-fern pots. **Bottom:** The make-your-own-mixed-container contest at Pleasant View Gardens was the hit of the day.