

Odds and Ends

It's October already, with the fall season well underway all over the United States. Most people are tired of raking leaves but willing to decorate for Halloween. Football season is almost halfway over, and the kids are already tired of school. Well, this month I don't have a single theme to write about, so I thought I would put some odds and ends together that I have run into over the past few months and are appropriate for this season. You can chew on them while finishing up the fall season or taking care of the poinsettias.

TIME TO LEASE?

Why don't some of the large growers just lease garden center space from the big box stores because in some parts of the country, the large grower is doing more and more for this customer. Some of the items this would address are: 1) frequent truck deliveries; 2) merchandisers in each store; 3) restocking; 4) answering questions from customers; 5) rebates for advertising; 6) guaranteed sales; 7) special programs (includes plants, pots, labels or containers); and 8) even watering plants.

Growers end up doing everything except ringing up the sales themselves, so why not just take over the space, make improvements, keep it well stocked with your own plants and have your own well-trained people servicing the customers? The box stores are interested in more people coming into their stores, and they view the garden center as a draw and a profit center of some sorts. I think some of the large growers could do a better job of running the garden center.

FALL CROPS

The over-emphasis on fall mums and pansies is getting old. Most people do not view fall mums as a perennial but treat them as annuals with color lasting for a few weeks before cold weather really sets in. Fall pansies do well in plantings in the fall and again during the spring, but even with all of the colors now available, pansies in some markets are not selling as well as they used to.

People are growing tired of the limited choices. Growers need to look into different plants that do well in the fall and cool weather but can be treated as annuals. Snaps, dianthus, kale and cabbage, dusty miller and even some petunias

will do fine at this time of year. There are also some vegetative crops that show good color until a killing freeze. Again, people want to replace their large containers in the fall with more color. What do you have to offer that is different and colorful?

POINSETTIA PROLIFERATION

With the good poinsettia cutting season we had this past year, I would expect a glut of finished poinsettias on the market. There will be another battle of low-priced poinsettias in some box stores (five for \$10), and some parts of the country will have price battles of their own due to oversupply. Weather conditions during shipping and selling will also affect sales. More and more growers will be complaining about not making any money on poinsettias.

I had an interesting discussion with Bill Swanekamp from Kube-Pak Corp., a client of mine. Bill gave a good talk at this past OFA Short Course on figuring out overhead costs. His calculations demonstrated that only 15 percent of his costs and sales were recognized from July to December, although it is common to calculate an average cost per square-foot-week for the year. With this old method of calculating costs, it was difficult to demonstrate that growing fall crops was profitable. To quote Bill, "With this new method, it is easy to see that crops grown in the fall are actually profitable since a different value for overhead is used in the fall than in the spring." Maybe more growers need to recalculate their overhead costs, looking at spring separate from fall. I think fewer growers would be complaining about not making money after they recalculate their overhead as Bill did.

DISPLAY WOES

It has been demonstrated time and time again that better plant displays result in more sales. By better displays, I mean fresh plants with appropriate information about consumer care being watered properly and set up in interesting positions easily reached by shoppers.

During the spring, more and more stores and garden centers emphasize their displays of spring plants. Why doesn't this carry over to poinsettias? I get so upset when I visit different stores, whether it is box stores, grocery chains or retail garden centers and see how poorly they

display and take care of their poinsettias. You cannot make an attractive display when poinsettias are still in their sleeves or boxes!

Mass color always attracts people. Group white poinsettias around the purple varieties, and see how much more purple you sell. (For a higher price, I hope!) Use contrasting colors to make up your displays. Work with the big box stores, using your own merchandisers to improve the display, care and handling of poinsettias. You spend 3-4 months growing this crop; I'm sure you don't want to see it ruined within a day or two of getting to the store.

VISITING A TRIAL

This past June, I had the privilege of visiting Park Seed Company's field trial during its annual open house. I was very surprised to see how some of the different crops and varieties performed in this year's wet spring. All of the vinca varieties looked great! But what interested me the most was the appearance of bacterial leaf spot on a number of zinnia varieties. It was a great opportunity to see which varieties were resistant to this disease, as some varieties were entirely infected while a variety right next to it was not infected at all.

This is just one of the things growers can learn when visiting a trial, whether a field, pack or pot trial. Take advantage of nearby trials to learn what you can about the crops you are growing or want to grow. There are many good field trials across the country. If you can't make it to the California Pack Trials, find a field trial in your part of the country. If you grow a lot of poinsettias, you should visit Purdue University, North Carolina State University or University of Florida to see the National Trials, or your local university to see a more limited trial.

Well, that takes care of the odds and ends for now. I'm sure I'll have some more in the next few months. I would be interested to hear from you about any of the above, or other topics that should be considered. After all, my best information for this column comes from discussions with different growers around the country. GPN

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