



Getting a Handle on Combinations

Combination planters are popular with consumers; taking the time to do the job right can be very profitable.

By Roger C. Styer

Now that another spring season is winding down, it's time to review the major growing problems. From working with growers of all sizes, I think the number one problem this year was combinations. Combinations of all types sell well in independent garden centers, though not always so in big box stores. Putting together different types of plants in the same container is a very big trend in our industry, so getting this right can be very profitable.

PROBLEMS WITH COMBOS

Personally, I like combinations of plants in large containers. I have my own preferences as to color, shape, habit and size of the container, but that is just me. The problem comes when you need to make up combinations for different people with different tastes.

I think combos do best in larger containers, but I see many growers trying to make a 10-inch basket with three different plants. Too crowded! Container sizes can range from small ovals and

bowls to big moss baskets and huge tubs. Try something different and stay large!

I also see many growers using some very strange combinations of plants. Part of the problem might be that, combos are often made of left-over plants. Other times, there is no

sense of how the shape and colors of the plants go together in the container.

Another big problem is production times, which can be all over the place. Some growers start the combos with plugs and liners and grow the containers for a long time, while others cram together 4-inch or smaller plants and ship right away. It's critical to know how long it

will take plants to fill out and flower.

When putting together different plants, you have to be able to control the growth of the vigorous plants or they will overgrow the others. Understanding how vigorous each plant is before going into the combo can help with growth control. Otherwise, you will be trimming in the middle of shipping season.

Shipping combos presents another unique problem. Carts are typically set up for shipping flats, so different shelving, sleeving, etc. are needed for combos. The cost of shipping containers is greater than for flats, just due to the number that can fit on a truck, and many growers do not know if they are really making more money on combos than they would growing and shipping more flats because they haven't adequately figured out all expenses.

HOW TO IMPROVE

I suggest that my clients take pictures of new varieties and combinations at trade shows and conferences. I advise them to gather information sheets on these varieties, talk with suppliers and review the information with their growing and marketing groups. Each person attending the trade show should be responsible for getting information on 3-5 different plants that could work in combos, as well as getting pictures of them in actual combos. It is vitally important that they also get cultural information, since each year many new varieties are introduced.

There are a number of books, Web sites, combo patterns from suppliers and gardening magazines where you can get combo ideas. Be aware of changing color trends as well. Just because you grow a great combo one year does not mean it will sell well the next year.

Look for additional creativity within your organization. Because 80 percent of our customers are women, it makes sense to have some women who have a talent with colors and shapes put together their own combos for review. And, try to change more than 20 percent of your combos every year.

Once you decide on all of the designs you want to produce, you need to schedule your cuttings and plugs and order accordingly, whether

or not you grow your own plugs and root your own cuttings. Late ordering will get you lots of variety subs and CNS (cannot supply).

Scheduling and ordering needs to be based on how you will grow the combos. There are three basic choices: 1) Plant liners and plugs directly into combos and grow for a long time; 2) use cell-packs and small pots (4-inch or less), plant into combos when ready and grow them for another 2-3 weeks to root in and fill out; or 3) cram cell-packs and pots into combos at the last minute and ship right away. I think the second choice works best, but you need good scheduling to make this work.

For height control, make sure liners have been treated with Florel if needed and that vigorous varieties are dipped in A-Rest, Bonzi or Sumagic before potting into the combo. This will hold back the growth for 2-3 weeks, allowing the slower varieties to get growing and not be overgrown at shipping. Most combos cannot be sprayed or drenched with growth regulators, as they usually include plants that will respond differently to the growth regulator. However, if the combo can be drenched with Bonzi or Sumagic at the end, do so. Otherwise, you will be doing a lot of trimming before shipping.

I try to get wholesale growers to define what the combination should look like at shipping. That image is typically smaller than what sales wants, but it has to ship in one piece or it won't sell. Big, trailing combos look great in the greenhouse, but unless you can sleeve them or protect them on special carts, most branches will be broken by the time it gets into the store.

Finally, put pencil to paper and figure out what your true production costs are for all of your combos, including shipping. Then you will know what your price needs to be. If the big box stores will not give you that price, move on to other containers and leave the combos to someone else. GPN

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