

vegetative matters

Travels on Highway 101

Nemesia 'Sunsatia Banana'

Pack trials this year seemed a lot like our national outlook: cautious and playing to its strengths. There was a lot of wonderful material, but it was toned down a bit from last year. There seemed to be more improvements on existing series, and fewer off-the-wall new plant introductions. Guess that is to be expected given the economic climate of 2003.

I feel very fortunate to be able to work in the new crops area of our industry; however, by three days into pack trials, I found myself more interested in the display containers than in the plants that fill the pots. This year was a tough one for the marginals I like so much.

Regardless of my preferences, I'll be the first to admit we wouldn't have an industry if it weren't for the generic bedding material; it just gets a little hard to compare very similar plants at different locations and then remember why this red (insert generic crop) is so vastly different from the other 15 red (insert generic crop) series you saw yesterday. Pack Trials attendees are treated to a mind-numbing array of improved geraniums, New Guinea impatiens, bedding impatiens, begonias, vincas, petunias, etc. — all of which are very good.

Sorting out differences between plants became even more important this year, as I was touring with the editors from *GPN*, some of which were getting their first exposure to the diversity of our industry. By the end of day two, everyone was overloaded with cultivar names and struggling to get through to the real issues involved with all these crops.

Almost everyone we saw had a good representation of plant materials, but color and

SOURCES FOR SUNSATIA NEMESIA AND INTENSIA PHLOX

Proven Winners

www.provenwinners.com

Web site has contact information for local suppliers.



Phlox 'Intensia Neon Pink'
(Photos this page courtesy of Proven Winners)

the pack trials

COMPANION COVERAGE

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Don't miss next month's coverage!



University of Florida

This historic highway takes you from one end of the state to the other, with a whole lot of plants in between.

By Rick Schoellhorn

name aside, the *real* issues come down to crop scheduling, time to flower, patented or unpatented materials, and specific production requirements. By the end of Pack Trials, both Pooh and June (names changed to protect the innocent) were asking the right questions. It is really a matter of cutting to the chase or drowning in information that, in the end, isn't critical. It was a real education to travel with the *GPN* crew, and I earned a new name "Richard Cranium," I think because I was the resident "know-it-all."

Culture Quickie: Sunsatia nemesia and Intensia phlox

Production guidelines for these crops are similar enough to put the two together.

Fertilizer. Normal bedding plant fertility is adequate (± 200 ppm), avoid high ammonium fertilizers as they can weaken growth and reduce quality.

Watering. Normal watering. For nemesia, allow media to dry slightly between waterings, but severe wilting results in reduced flower size, vastly reduced quality and crop loss.

Media. Use a well-drained production media with a pH of 6.0-6.5.

Temperature. Cooler production temperatures (day 65-75° F) are best, but plants are doing well in Florida under temperatures in the high 80s. For best finish and color, run cool nights (45-55° F) where possible. Nemesia are more sensitive to this than Phlox.

Light. Full sun, high light is a great way to control the crop and get the best branching. Avoid shady production situations.

Propagation. Produced by liners.

Timing. According to literature, both require a pinch, but we did not see any need for it in our trials. Both plants can be sheared and re-grown in 1-gal. containers. In spring, from liner to salable 4½-inch, *Sunsatia nemesia* takes 5-7 weeks; 8- to 10-inch baskets (3-4 liners per) take 10-12 weeks. In 4- to 5-inch pots (one liner per) *Intensia phlox* takes about 4-7 weeks; 8- to 10-inch baskets (4-5 liners per) take 13-15 weeks.

Growth regulators. Daminozide (B-Nine) at 2,500-5,000 ppm.

Flowering. Plants are not photoperiodic and continue to bloom into the long days of summer.

Problems. Watch for aphids and white flies. Poorly drained soil often leads to root problems in both crops. A broad spectrum fungicide at planting is always a good idea.

When using *Sunsatia nemesia* in mixed containers, select for companion plants that are of moderate vigor and fine texture to keep light and air circulation high.

SUNSATIA NEMESIA

This series of nemesia from Proven Winners reports combining the colors of the old *Nemesia strumosa* with the hardiness of the *Nemesia fruticans* group. In summary, while the *N. fruticans* group is tougher and easier to produce, it is limited to shades of blue and pink. While the *N. strumosa* group has a broader color range that includes reds and oranges, it requires such cool conditions that its uses are limited.

The Sunsatia series has a brilliant crimson, as well as yellow and white tones. Plants are a bit finer textured than *N. strumosa*, but with large flowers and strong growth. I think this series will definitely open up this crop to growers who might not have tried it before. For Southern growers, this entire genus has huge potential as a winter flowering plant. We are currently trialing some of the Sunsatia in our spring trials. While they are doing well, our heat has already begun to kick in, and it will be interesting to see how much they can handle. Northern growers would have a much longer spring season to work with, and these plants are easy to produce!

The Sunsatia series currently includes: 'Sunsatia Banana', a medium yellow; 'Sunsatia Coconut', a cream; 'Sunsatia Cranberry', a cranberry red; 'Sunsatia Lemon', a bright yellow; 'Sunsatia Peach', a light yellow and soft violet bicolor; and 'Sunsatia Pineapple', a pale yellow.

INTENSIA PHLOX

OK, we use *Phlox drummondii* for a highway wildflower here in Florida, and I was a little skeptical of what this series might do. So far, they are one of the stars of our spring trials and have been in constant flower since planted March 31. Intensia from Proven Winners is basically a larger flowered hybrid with a slightly grayer leaf color and a prostrate growth habit. All varieties in the series are compact, low growing and spreading. The entire canopy is covered in blooms and has been for six weeks. Intensia has sailed through our 90° F heat wave and continue to show no signs of losing steam.

This is another easy and very rewarding crop to grow, as it began flowering quickly and would have a very short crop time. Again, primarily a spring crop, but it will be interesting to see how much heat it'll take when the summer rains kick in, and I hope they will have enough frost tolerance to enter the winter season market as well.

VERBASCUM

Verbascum, common name Woolly Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*), has species native to almost every state in the union. These are great drought-tolerant,

upright-flowering plants that deserve the attention we give foxgloves and delphinium, whose growth habit they share. Verbascum have little to no chilling requirement, prefer poor soils in the landscape and can be grown by anyone enterprising enough to try them out. An advantage over their more popular cousins is that

they have a strong foliage interest, as well as beautiful flowers. The more unimproved species have small flowers on upright spikes over silvery



Verbascum bombicyferum

SOURCES FOR VERBASCUM HYBRIDS

Benary Seed
www.benary.com

PanAmerican Seed
www.panamseed

Culture Quickie: Verbascum hybrids

Fertilizer. Normal bedding plant rates are fine (\pm 150 ppm).

Watering. Plants prefer to be a bit on the dry side. Avoid over-watering, and give lots of good air circulation.

Media. Although tolerant of most production mixes, go for well drained types

Temperature. Best to grow cool 60° F night and 75° F day, but temperatures can be above that and still produce a great crop. Plants can be grown in cool houses in early spring when temperatures are kept above freezing.

Light. The brighter the light, the better the crop. These plants love strong lighting; do not even try to grow them in shade. Full sun production gives better foliage color and produces shorter plants with stronger stems.

Propagation. Seed propagated. Seed germinates cool at 60-65° F in about 14 days under good germination conditions. Under less than optimal conditions, seed may take up to 30 days to germinate. Lightly cover seed with thin layer of vermiculite.

Timing. Best in 1-gal. production or as a cut flower. Crop times range from 12-18 weeks for flowering, depending on species. Contact supplier for more detailed information on specific hybrids. Ideally, flowering types should be shipped just as spikes emerge; foliage forms can be shipped at any time after sufficient size has been developed.

Growth regulators. Early application of plant growth regulators, as spikes are emerging, can give more compact plants for shipping. Start with ½-1 ppm paclobutrazol (Bonzi, Piccolo) drench, and reapply as needed.

Flowering. Verbascum is considered a day neutral plant. Plants naturally flower in cool weather as days lengthen in spring. Plan for spring crops by sowing early.

foliage. In most flowering cultivars, you'll find the silver hairs reduced and the flower colors from red, purple and pink into yellow and white.

I found two verbascum at this year's Pack Trials. The first is *Verbascum bombyciferum* from Benary. With silver foliage and a strong rosette shape, this plant makes a beautiful foliage accent. The second is the 'Southern Charm' series (hybrids of *Verbascum phoeniceum*) from PanAmerican Seed. The series is actually sold as a cut flower mix but can be produced in 1-gal. containers. Colors in the series range from white through purple reds and are very attractive. A side note, backpackers use *Verbascum thapsus* as toilet paper, so even if your crop doesn't sell, it always has a back-up use! Just kidding, but as with any new crop, start small and grow the crop once you have the market for it.



Verbascum 'Southern Charm' (Photo courtesy of PanAmerican Seed)

NEXT MONTH

Recommending new crops can always be a little tough, especially for a marginal crops guy like me. Hope you find these few varieties useful. They really are winners. I'll be highlighting additional varieties next month. **GPN**

Rick Schoellhorn is extension specialist at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla. He can be reached by phone at (352) 392-1831 x364 or E-mail at rksch@ifas.ufl.edu.



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