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# Your Role With the Media

**A**t the University of Florida's Floriculture Field Days, held the middle of last month, I had the opportunity to take part in a panel discussion on using the media to promote new and unusual plants. Of course, I was there as a representative of the trade press, and there were a few questions from breeder/marketer attendees about when and how to contact the trade press to promote a new variety. Very, very quickly, however, our discussion turned to the consumer press and how growers/retailers could ensure availability of the products promoted by the consumer press.

It seems that the consumer press, be it the local paper or a best-selling national magazine, is a beast many growers and retailers have yet to focus on, much less tame. Audience members asked how featured plants were selected, where article ideas (many of which it was noted are off-season or otherwise inappropriate) came from, and why garden editors were often so out-of-touch with the industry.

Over the course of an hour, me and my fellow panelists (who included such industry stalwarts as Gary Alan from HGTV's the Designer's Landscape; noted Southern columnist, author and Master Gardner Felder Rushing; and Proven Winners' John Gaydos) tried to field questions about finding and marketing new plant material, as well as explain the process of working with the media to promote these gems.

It was a great discussion, and a few of the items that came up beg distribution to a wider audience. Here goes.

## MEDIA MYTHS

*Myth #1 — Garden editors are horticulturists.*

Most garden editors are or become gardeners, but the vast majority of them, especially in newspapers, are trained as journalists not horticulturists. They can write and edit and put together a newspaper, but they know nothing about flower initiation or shipping requirements. They have simply been assigned to the Garden section like their peers are assigned to the Metro or Real Estate section.

While this might sound scary, the inmates in charge of the prison, it can play in your favor: If the person in charge of the Garden section at your local newspaper or city's magazine is a blank slate you've got a lot of chalk. You should make this person your best friend. Invite them to any event at your facility, send them article ideas and product information, become a resource they can rely on for good content when

time is short. You will be amazed at how receptive they will be to your help. They're usually just looking for something to fill their allotted space, and an article idea or product information from you will seem like manna from heaven.

*Myth #2 — Consumer press controls the amount of exposure a plant gets.*

If the above is true — and trust me, it usually is — then who really has control over which plants get exposure and what information consumers read? You do.

Just take a minute to let the full impact of that statement sink in. If you've started growing a unique new plant and will be shipping it to a certain area, send information about this plant and how to use it in the landscape to the garden editor in that area. When it's time to plant bulbs, send selection and planting instructions. Want to promote early spring sales? Send information on plants that can take a frost or protecting tender plants from frost.

The above are just a few ways that working with the consumer media can have real impact on your sales. There are many, many more. The key is to be proactive and get the information to the newspaper/magazine. Otherwise, don't be surprised when you see an article about pruning rose bushes in the summer.

*Myth #3 — There's no way to ensure availability.*

There are actually several ways to ensure you're producing the plants that will be featured in upcoming newspapers and magazines. The easiest is to supply the information yourself (see above). If you send the newspaper a list of plants that can take the heat, you can be fairly sure there will be a demand for those plants at local garden centers. The other way requires a bit of research. Check the Web sites of all the national magazines. I know that *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Southern Living* both post a list of the plants that will be covered during the next quarter or even year. Newspapers are much more secretive about their content, but national magazines have started to realize that they need to work back through the supply chain on featured items before putting them in the magazine.

## INFORMATION TO USE

I know what you're probably thinking: This is a lot of work. You're right, it is. You have to work to find the right contacts, maintain the relationship and develop printable content. It is a lot of work...but the payoff can make it well worth your time and effort.

Good sources for information can easily be identified on the Internet, and no one said you

## next month...

- Pick of the Pack Trials, Part II
- Chase & Daughtrey on Rhizoctonia control
- PGR research reports from Jim Barrett

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## Letters to the editor

have to send an entire article. You could just provide a list of appropriate topics for the season, with a few bulleted talking points and your contact information for interviewing purposes.

Regardless of how you handle working with the media, the main rule to keep in mind is that they are looking for something that will be educational and informative for their readers; they are not there to provide you with free press. Always make the information useful, not advertorial, and you'll see the benefits roll in.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I knew the two-page Editor's Report in the March 2004 issue of *GPN* entitled "A Call to Action" would draw some response. It was a touchy subject that had elicited strong emotions, many of which were still very fresh in most people's minds. Still, I thought it important to send a message to the industry about responsibility and involvement; what I didn't intend was to send a message about the importance of some of our associations or to belittle the work they do on behalf of greenhouse growers. Since, however, this did happen, I wanted to give some space this month to a letter I received from Terril Nell, a good friend and current president of SAF, detailing the work SAF does for our industry.

Bridget L. Welch

Dear Bridget,

It was good talking to you last week. As we discussed, I read with interest your recent Editor's Report in *GPN* about the situation with *Ralstonia*, and I wanted to take issue with your statement that "we don't have a formal, industry-wide lobby" for the floriculture industry. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Society of American Florists (SAF) IS the floriculture industry's lobby. SAF has been lobbying on behalf of the floriculture industry literally since it was formed — by growers — in 1884. SAF's efforts before Congress, federal regulatory agencies and state legislatures have, without a doubt, benefited the floral industry and small business owners who make their livelihood from it.

Regarding the specific situation you address in your editorial, SAF was called on two years ago by geranium growers to lead them through the federal bureaucracy and identify key people within the federal government who could help with the *Ralstonia* issue. For the last 24 months, SAF along with its industry partner, the American Nursery and Landscape Association (ANLA), has lobbied aggressively on behalf of the geranium working group and ultimately on behalf of every producer, big or small, who grows geraniums, to make sure geranium cuttings could still be imported into the United States. At one point, a very real possibility existed that the USDA would prohibit all geranium cuttings from entering the United States. SAF through its lobbying efforts, went to bat for growers and convinced the USDA to allow continued importation of cuttings based on strict production protocols and inspection controls established jointly by the USDA and growers to help guard against future *Ralstonia* outbreaks and to address situations when they do occur. SAF facilitated the certification program with breeders, growers and the USDA based on strong, science based information. These achievements could not have happened without SAF's strong, well-connected and focused lobbying efforts.

The title of your editorial "A Call to Action" was correct — The industry needs to rally behind SAF — "The Growers Voice in Washington" to assure the industry is represented effectively on agriculture and small business issues on Capitol Hill. I encourage you in the pages of *GPN* to tell your readers about the value of belonging to SAF and educate them about the benefits of SAF's advocacy efforts in Washington, DC. SAF IS the formal, industry-wide lobby that you refer to in your opinion piece. And by participating in SAF, growers can speak with a single voice.

In addition, I encourage you personally to attend SAF's annual Congressional Action Days next March and walk the halls of Congress with growers who believe in and value their involvement with SAF, the industry's lobbying voice.

Yes, I am the current president of SAF, but I have been involved with the organization for nearly 20 years, long before I ever became an officer, and I can say without hesitation that SAF fights for the floral industry, and especially growers, every single day on Capitol Hill.

Sincerely,

Terril Nell, Ph.D., AAF