

pack trials 2005

companion coverage

Vegetative Matters	page 18
Breeding Breakthroughs	page 26
Trialing the Varieties	page 32
Best in Show	page 38



Best of Pack Trials

I make our Pack Trials schedule every year, and it becomes more of a challenge each year. More exhibitors, more people to dine with each night, more time needed at each location, etc. — but trust me, these are all good challenges!

This year I also had a fifth person to add to our group, which included my fellow editors Bridget White and Catherine Evans

and University of Florida's Rick Schoellhorn (read his take on Pack Trials on page 18) and grad student Chris Cervený. Such a group made conversations in the van just that much more interesting. In between stops we would talk about what we just saw, what we thought about this diascia vs. that diascia, will that salvia work in the South, what kind of margin will growers get on that impatiens, etc.

With the exception of Chris, we had all been to Pack Trials at least three times, and though it's easy to get into the mindset that every year is the same, there's always something every day that makes it memorable. And those few hours you have in the car are great times to talk about it, though sometimes you have to let loose and joke around. And we did: Catherine got in the car after we visited Ball and said "Ball should get an award for their bathrooms; they always have the nicest bathrooms." Of course we all laughed, and then we started thinking: There should be awards for out-of-the-ordinary things at Pack Trials. And here is a sampling of what we think are the Pack Trials' Best Of's. Congratulations to you winners; unfortunately this mention is your only prize!

- Best tour guide: Jack Williams, Ecker Ranch — Jack tells it to you straight; this crop would be great for you or you really shouldn't be growing this.
- Best bathroom: Ball FloraPlant — Wallpapered, wall hangings, flushable toilets, numerous stalls, etc. — just a few of the positives about these bathrooms.
- Best meal: Goldsmith Seeds — This one was difficult; Goldsmith lunch or dinner? Lunch was eggplant parmigiana, and dinner was a good old-fashioned Thanksgiving dinner with turkey and mashed potatoes.
- Best pen: Proven Winners — A retractable Sharpie; there's not much more to say!
- Best snack: Suntory — We look forward to the Harry & David cheesecake every year.
- Best display: American Takii — Their outside themed gardens made for a good visit; oh, and their spelling of Takii with ornamental cabbage was just too cool.

Back to business, you can find five innovative vegetative varieties that we just couldn't stop ranting about on page 26. Pacific Plug & Liner's (PPL) grower, Ryan Hall, details PPL's osteo trials done specifically for Pack Trials on page 32. And, get a summary of some of the trials' Best in Show on page 38. Enjoy!



The Rest of the Trials

New varieties aren't the only draw to Pack Trials. Find out about the industry's latest trends and newest directions in vegetative plants.

By Carrie Burns, Catherine Evans and Bridget White

With so many new plant introductions every year it starts to get a little difficult to get excited about another shade of red geranium, an impatiens that is a quarter of an inch shorter or another day length "neutral" petunia. So for many of us the best part of Pack Trials has become identifying emerging trends in the industry. Of course, that's not saying we didn't find lots of plants to get excited about (see pages 26 and 38 for some of our favorites). Just that there are other things going on at Pack Trials besides the plants, and if you are like us and you want to see what's up in the industry before you get down to the real work of selecting which new varieties to trial, then we've got all you need.

MARKETING TRENDS

After years of marketing, marketing and more marketing, it was nice to see the vegetative companies take a little break this year. That's not to detract from Proven Winners' (PW) display of new ways to use their brand at retail or Ball FloraPlant's reinvented Simply Beautiful, which includes new tags, labels and POP materials to support the new tagline "Expect Success." But what we saw this year was a switch from everyone generating brands to companies creating programs to help growers.

Both PW and Fischer USA capitalized on this trend by developing marketing programs to extend the traditional spring season. PW's Spring Magic consists of frost-tolerant plants that are ideal for early season sales. Spring Magic is a limited collection of blooming and colorful plants offered in mixed containers only to Gold Key and select grower/retailers. Despite its great tag, which sits above foliage and carries the tagline "Take me outside I'll survive" and what will undoubtedly be stellar advertising support, PW is going to have an uphill battle with this program, both in train-



Proven Winner's Spring Magic program hopes to start the season



ing gardeners to shop this time of year and in convincing them to buy plants with a 4- to 6-week lifespan. Fischer's Beat the Heat collection is a little more simple. It is composed of heat-tolerant plants that will thrive in the hot and humid conditions of late summer. Sold under the Goldfish brand, tagging includes a Beat the Heat sign, but the program was designed to help growers identify which plants to grow this time of year, not make consumers buy more plants.

Probably the most innovative new program this year is Selecta First Class' High Density designation. This is not a marketing/merchandising program and does not even extend through to the consumer. You will find the High Density logo in Selecta's catalogues, Web site and other grower-marketing materials but not on plant tags. High Density simply means that Selecta has reviewed its offerings and determined those marked with High Density to be suitable for close spacing in production. It's a way to let growers know they can make more money on those varieties by growing them at close spacing.

CROP TRENDS

The most notable crop trend with vegetative suppliers continues to be companies filling in their offerings with all the standard vegetative crops in hopes of becoming a one-stop shop. Practically everyone, with the exception of Jackson & Perkins and Oglevee Ltd., now has the "vegetative basics": osteo, nemesia, diasca, petunia, calibrachoa, etc. Even Fides North America, which had been a potted plant company, has added snapdragons and calibrachos. This means that the most numerous introductions this year were crops such as petunias, verbenas, geraniums and New Guinea impatiens. We didn't notice a single company that failed to add at least some of these standards.

In talking with growers at the Pack Trials, we heard mixed reactions about the idea of a one-stop shop. Some hoped that buying more product from one supplier would give deeper discounts; others said the introductions would not sway them from what they already know. One thing is for sure, the genetics are getting substantially better in vegetative crops, and while we have a way to go before we reach the standard set by seed, it's getting harder and harder to jump into the game with just any old genetics.

As far as specific crops, probably the most numerous was osteos. For the second year in a row, everyone seemed to be introducing

osteos. Fischer introduced the Tradewinds series, Cohen Propagation Nurseries introduced the Serenity series and Selecta introduced the Kenai series, not to mention that PW, Ball and Selecta all added varieties to existing series. There were at least 25 new osteo varieties introduced just this year, with an emphasis on the interspecific Symphony type. This is a great crop that often brings high margins, and the breeding emphasis is welcome, as many of the older series are variable and vigorous (see page 32 for more information).

There were a few notable crop oddities in this year's exhibits. Everyone was talking about Bodger Botanical's Giant Spinner gerbera series. The flowers on these very vigorous plants are as big as 6 inches across. And while the flowers certainly grabbed attention, we couldn't help wondering about shipping and season-long interest. This is definitely one for grower/retailers and might even be best in mixed containers, as there is little interest to the plant when not in bloom. The other unexpected introduction came from EuroAmerican Propagators through the Proven Selections brand: foliage plants. Yes, you read correctly, Euro introduced two: banana plants and dieffenbachia. They are nice plants, but you could get practically the same thing on any street corner in Florida, so we couldn't resist asking why. You know Euro; they asked why not. With all the emphasis on tropicals it seemed to them like a natural extension to fill out their product line...here comes that one-stop shop again.

Other popular crops this year were diasca, with two new series and eight color additions; lobelia, with one new series and five new color additions; lantana, with two new series and four new color additions; and lots of perennials.

And if all this sounds like a lot of new introductions, there were. While the number was down from last year, our best estimate is approximately 750 new varieties (both vegetative and seed)...and that's just from the companies exhibiting at the California Pack Trials. When you figure in international and non-exhibiting companies, the total will go well over 1,000.

ALLIANCES

Instead of company alliances, this year we saw companies staying more to themselves. No major alliances were announced, and two companies were conspicuously marketing their own material instead of a competitor's.



Left: Only a marketing program in the loosest sense of the term, Selecta First Class' High Density program designates plants appropriate for high-density production. Middle: One of the more spectacular varieties introduced this year, 'Giant Spinner Pink/White' from Bodger Botanicals was the talk of the trials. Right: Diascia 'Devotion Rose', from S&G Flowers, is one of the many diascia introduced this year.



In response to shifting alliances, Ecke Ranch introduced two new verbena series this year.

The Name Game

Just like with baby names, every year there are trends in crop names. Here are a few of the common plant names from Pack Trials 2005.

Location names. Series names that take you away from the everyday grind and evoke a far off, always better, place.

Tropical Breeze and Tropical Mist verbena from Ecke Ranch, Savannah salvia from Bodger Botanicals, Florida Mound lantana from GroLink, Bombay scaveola from Fischer USA and Serengeti nemesia from Selecta First Class.

Sun names. Evoking the sun is nothing new when it comes to naming plants, so it's not surprising to see so many series advertising their love of the sun.

Sunsatia nemesia from Proven Winners, Sunray petunia from Danziger "Dan" Flower Farm, Sundance bidens from Fischer, California Sun bidens from Cohen Propagation Nurseries and SweetSunshine petunia from Selecta.

Other worldly names. The only explanation we could come up with for this naming trend is that the companies are trying to tell people their product is out of this world, heavenly...you know...perfect.

Paradise New Guinea impatiens from Ecke, StarStruck trailing geranium from Ball FloraPlant, Nirvana vinca from Fischer, Stratosphere gaura from Proven Winners and Angelic argyranthemum from Danziger.

Ball introduced a line of calibrachos from its own breeding instead of Kirin's, which is now marketed exclusively by its offspring Fides. Ecke Ranch has also replaced Goldsmith Seeds' vegetative verbenas, which are now marketed exclusively by Fischer under the Goldfish brand, with newly acquired lines from multiple international sources.

The one possible exception might be Ecke and Sakata Seed America forming a closer relationship. As in the past, Ecke continues to market a large part of Sakata's vegetative material, and with Sakata recently hiring former Ecke employee Ron Cramer, Pack Trials was abuzz with speculation about a possible merger. The two companies stress that the personnel exchange is just coincidence and that the companies are just good friends, no merger in sight.

The other interesting development announced at Pack Trials involved a clearer distinction between Twyford International and Fides. In the past, the two sister companies had divided genetics from parent company Kirin, with Twyford offering some of the products from tissue culture and Fides offering the others from cuttings. Now, the two companies are being divided along product lines, with Twyford offering foliage products and Fides offering color products. It's a much clearer distinction and will make marketing efforts and grower relations much easier.

That's about it for the vegetative varieties. As you can see, Pack Trials was pretty quiet this year — no major announcements, no really good gossip. Next month's coverage will focus on some very interesting programs and developments on the seed side, where after several years of taking a back stage to vegetative, the companies are really starting to step up.

Carrie Burns is managing editor, Catherine Evans is associate editor and Bridget White is editorial director of GPN. They can be reached by phone at (847) 391-1019 or E-mail at cburns@sgcmail.com.

LearnMore
For more information related to this article, go to www.gpnmag.com/lm.cfm/gp060502