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# Growing on the Edge

**S**pring is finally here. Product is flying off the retail shelves, growers are starting to settle down a bit, the California Pack Trials have come and gone and the Marketing Innovation Award winners are being announced.

Denver, Colorado-based Welby Gardens, this year's runner-up, distinguished themselves both through their marketing program (read more about their program in Brandi Thomas' article on page 16) and also with their product category. Herbs are a growing market, and especially holistic, pesticide-free herbs like the ones in Welby's program. As more and more of our crops become commodities — mums, poinsettias, bedding plant cell packs — innovative growers like Welby are seeking ways to differentiate themselves, and to make a little money. Fringe crops are a common solution.

## WHAT'S OUT THERE

Herb production is nothing new. Herbs have been a small, steady, niche market for many, many years, but recently, we hear of growers devoting an increasing amount of greenhouse space to herb production. The herb program at Welby started as an experiment and is about to expand into a second production range. Orlando, Florida-based Shore Acres, profiled in the September 2001 issue of *GPN*, has moved from a standard bedding plant producer to devoting approximately 50 percent of their production space to finish and plug herb production.

And herbs are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Brown's Greenhouses, Arvada, Colo., has devised a way to market standard spring bulbs as a specialty item. (We'll have more information about Brown's in an upcoming issue of *GPN*. Until then, if you're having trouble with standard bulb production, see Bill Miller's article on PGRs and bulbs on page 8.) Meriam Karlsson,

University of Alaska-Fairbanks, suggests forget-me-nots as a specialty crop for both cut arrangements and potted production; see page 32 for production information and cultivar selection.

Starting to see a pattern? Specialty crops — be they herbs, specialty cut flowers, unusual vegetative material or anything else to the left of ordinary — are the fastest-growing segment in floriculture, according to the 2001 *GPN* State of the Industry Report sponsored by Summit Plastics, and something a lot more growers should be investigating. I know changing production practices, training growers and workers how to grow a new crop is not easy, but I see these types of specialty crops as the answer for many struggling growers, especially the small-to mid-sized grower.

## A LITTLE CLOSER TO HOME

If learning a new crop is a little too much to handle right now, don't worry. Having just returned from the Pack Trials, I can confidently say that there are plenty of striking colors, new forms and other variations on more traditional crops headed your way. Next month will start *GPN*'s coverage of the Pack Trials, but if you're ready for a sneak peek at some of the best of next year's offerings, take a look at the Winner's Circle article on page 20. These are winning varieties from AARS, AAS and Fleuroselect, most of which will be released next year.

Familiar names like Rudbeckia, vinca and Wave petunia are among the winners, but these are not the same varieties you're accustomed to seeing. In particular, new colors really make the varieties stand out, without being beyond a grower's comfort level.

The point? Whether it's a new color or a new presentation or a whole new product category, the key to this market is differentiation. It wins awards, gives you a niche but most importantly, it sells plants. GPN

## next month...

- GPN/MasterTag Marketing Innovation Award winner
- The best of the best from the California Pack Trials
- Drought — who has problems and what they're doing about it

### plus...

- Ornamental pepper production
- Using PGRs on vegetative annuals
- The latest Phytophthora research
- Mite identification guide

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