

research

Poinsettia Ponderings

The poinsettia market is varied going into recession-laden 2009, but promising new varieties and enthusiastic consumer surveys have some growers feeling optimistic.

By Jim Barrett



Top: Trial attendees take notes on poinsettia varieties. Left: 'Ice Crystal'. Right: 'Ice Punch'.

As would be expected in a depressed economy, mass-market poinsettia sales in 2008 were generally off but highly varied. Reports indicate that sales in 2008 were generally down by 10 to 20 percent compared to 2007, which itself was less than 2006. This varied significantly by region, with the decrease only in single digits for some areas and more than 20 percent in others.

Last year was a good one from the production standpoint: Weather was good, and there were few significant insect or disease issues. For most growers, height control was relatively easy and required fewer PGRs than an average year. There was a lot of good product available in most markets.

Going into 2008, most mass-market growers expected declining sales compared to 2007 and planned lower production numbers. Many growers reported they moved all or almost all of their product. However, there were a few situations where growers had large numbers remaining at the end and could not move them even at significant discounts.

There were fewer days between Thanksgiving and Christmas in 2008, and the third week of December was more important this year. As you might expect in a varied market, the demand continued in some cases, and growers managed to move the last of their product. But in several markets, stores were full of product that was not moving, and the retailers stopped taking deliveries.

So what about 2009? You have likely already decided what your numbers will be for fall. It seems the majority of growers will keep their numbers about the same as in 2008 or adjust them down slightly. However, there are a few operations that feel more confident and are increasing numbers. These operations feel they can handle it by being more aggressive in the sales department if needed.

Game-Changing Varieties

The two most important newer varieties are 'Ice Punch' and 'Ice Crystal'. From our consumer surveys and retail experience, it is clear that 'Ice Punch' has strong consumer appeal as a novelty. 'Ice Punch' will be featured by Home Depot again in '09, but it is no longer an exclusive. While 'Ice Crystal' and 'Ice Punch' have a similar color pattern with red margins and white along the center of the bract, the plants are not the same, and consumers can easily see the differences. The consumer survey data and informal conversations clearly show that 'Ice Crystal' will also have strong demand at retail.

For mass-market growers, 'Ice Punch' can be a little difficult to produce and needs to be handled differently than others varieties. 'Ice Crystal' is a sport in the Premium series and the growth habit is close to 'Premium Red'. For growers already doing the Premium series, 'Ice Crystal' should be



2008 University of Florida Consumer Survey Results

During the University of Florida public open house — where the public views the poinsettia variety trials and purchases plants grown by the student club — we conduct a blind survey every year to determine the public's preferences for different varieties. Below are the results for four of this year's survey questions. Number of participants for each question was between 396 and 424.

Question 1: Red Varieties

Participants were shown 10 red varieties and asked to indicate which three they liked the most.

Rank	Variety	Percent selecting this variety
1	'Prestige Red'	17
2	'Mars Red 09'	15
3	'Classic Red'	14
4	'Advent Red'	12
5	'Early Orion'	11
5	'Christmas Feelings Merlot'	11
7	'Novia'	9
8	'Premium Red'	5
9	'EuroGlory'	4
10	'Flame'	3

Mars and Prestige have both been ranked high in the comparison of the reds in previous years. It is interesting to see the new cultivars 'Classic Red' and 'Advent Red' rated so high along with Mars because they all have smaller than average bracts. Most consumers tell us they like all of the red varieties. For mass markets, the important characteristic for a red variety is how easy it is to grow, because they will all sell.

Question 2: Novelties

Participants were shown 10 novelty varieties plants and asked to indicate the three they liked the most.

Rank	Variety	Percent selecting this variety
1	'Ice Punch'	27
2	'Sonora White Glitter'	15
3	Ecke '54-06' (jingle-bell type)	14
4	'Cortez Burgundy'	13
5	'Visions of Grandeur'	11
6	'Dulce Rosa'	5
6	'Winter Rose Dark Red'	5
8	'Crazy Christmas'	4
8	'Cinnamon Stick'	4
10	'Silverstar Red'	3

'Ice Punch' has caused the strongest reaction in our participants the past two years. The position of Ecke '54-06' and 'Sonora White Glitter' reinforce the idea that the better jingle-bell types are strong varieties with many consumers. The position of 'Cortez Burgundy' shows that there are still many consumers who like it, but it is not the dominant novelty that it was a few years ago.

Question 3: Strong Novelty Varieties

Participants were shown these five varieties and were asked to indicate their favorite.

Rank	Variety	Percent selecting this variety
1	'Ice Punch'	54
2	'Ice Crystal'	32
3	'Monet Twilight'	7
4	'Premium Picasso'	4
5	'Picasso Punch'	3

This is a direct comparison of very strong novelty varieties. 'Monet Twilight' is a perennial favorite for our participants. The fact that 'Ice Punch' and 'Ice Crystal' were picked over 'Monet Twilight' by so many participants is an indicator of their strength. Participants who selected 'Ice Punch' indicated they liked the slight curl in the bracts and the color pattern compared to 'Ice Crystal'. Those who preferred 'Ice Crystal' indicated they liked the brighter red color compared to 'Ice Punch', and some indicated they liked the "spray painted" appearance of the bracts. ■



Novelty types were once again popular with consumers in the 2008 National Poinsettia Trials.

easily incorporated into their programs.

A new series that has been impressive is Christmas Angel with Red, White, Pink and Marble colors. The series has good uniformity in timing and growth habit. The red has a nice contrast of bright-red bracts with bright yellow and green on the cyathia. 'Christmas Angel Marble' may have the brightest colors of all the dark-leaf types. The plants have a good upright habit with thick, strong stems. The variety is versatile and can be used in a range of pot sizes. It will be particularly useful in 6½-inch and larger because it has the vigor and strength to produce larger sizes easily.

'Carousel Dark Red' is a new improvement over 'Carousel Red' and is a good novelty red for mass-market growers. 'Polly's Pink' is by far the brightest pink variety available. While it is a standalone variety, it could improve the appearance of pink plants in retail.

As we move toward finishing poinsettias at lower temperatures, we will put more emphasis on normally early-flowering varieties. 'Advent Red' is now probably the earliest variety we have. Also, the new Freedom Early series with colors has more potential to be important.

My standard recommendation for big growers is to concentrate on a few varieties that work in your situation. Grow as few varieties as possible, and don't change varieties unless it's really necessary.

There are many new varieties introduced each year; there were 24 new varieties in the 2008 National Poinsettia Trials alone. Reports and results from these trials are in the February and March issues of *GPN* or online at www.gpnmag.com. ■

Jim Barrett is professor of floriculture at the University of Florida. He can be reached at jbarrett@ufl.edu.

LearnMore

For more information related to this article, go to www.biggrower.com/lm.cfm/bg030902