

vegetative matters

companion coverage

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Pack Trial Lessons



2005 Pack Trials held many lessons, including the standard crop introductions, marketing ideas and more.

By Rick Schoellhorn
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This marks the third pack trials I have traveled with *GPN*. It seems fitting that this will also be my last column for the magazine (read on to find out why); third time is the charm. The *GPN* crew and myself went from south to north this year, and all along the way we saw that a cool and cloudy spring had played havoc with display materials, in comparison to last year when a lot of the early crops were nearly spent after a warm spring. So if you think of California as the easy place to grow plants, realize they have a lot in common with those of us in other locales. Weather makes such a difference no matter where you are.

MARKETING

Pack Trials 2005 was a wonderful experience because it knocked me out of my plant nerd groove into some bigger-picture perspectives about our industry, such as emphasis shifting more to marketing.

Our first stop was Proven Winners, and the focus here was definitely on ideas. The Spring Magic program was its highlight. Spring Magic relies on cold-hardy spring flowering plants that can be grown in minimally heated or unheated greenhouses and be ready to market much earlier than traditional spring items go out. We talk a lot about summer color and extending our sales in summer, but this attacks the other end of market expansion, early spring.

Henry F. Michell's brought out their "Plants for Dummies" marketing campaign. The logos are very recognizable, and the concept is to use plants known for their ability to stand up to tough situations and be successful for the average gardener. It will be interesting to see how the public reacts to the campaign; we all need to realize we are marketing to people who may have little knowledge of how to grow plants and would like the reassurance of simplicity.

VEGETATIVE CROPS

Proven Winners. The big star at Proven Winners (PW) was leucanthe-



Salvia 'Golden Delicious' (Proven Selections).
(Photos courtesy of Rick Schoellhorn)

mum 'Broadway Lights'

— a novelty yellow flowered shasta daisy. The coloring is unique, the plant is robust, and for those with cold springs this is going to be a really strong introduction. While there were other improvements to the PW line, I was drawn to some of the Proven Selections material, especially (big surprise) plectranthus 'Blue Yonder'. OK, I'm biased about plectranthus, but this one has beautiful sky-blue flowers over tough, durable variegated foliage. A really striking combination, especially paired with my other favorite, salvia 'Golden Delicious'. This is a chartreuse-foliaged form of pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*), and the combination of bright red flowers over brilliant yellow-green leaves makes for a dramatic specimen or component plant. Probably want to avoid intense sunlight to keep the foliage looking its best.

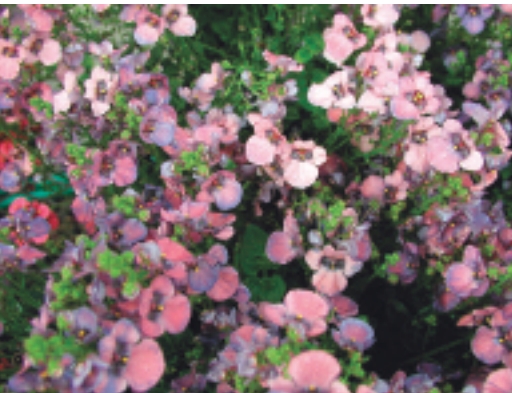
Twyford International/Fides North America. At the Twyford International/Fides North America stop was another favorite of mine *Cordyline australis*. Twyford currently produces 'Sundance' and 'Red Star', with some other cultivars in the works. There have been problems with availability on this crop, but once we get over the technology of large-scale tissue culture I think these plants will revolutionize mixed containers. Foliage contrast is their strength, but they are really tough plants. Watch your watering, especially under spring conditions.

Fides is introducing a new line of kalanchoe. Selected for large size and potential landscape use, the Veranda series is a dramatic statement in the display garden. I think we need to re-examine larger cultivars. I know growers will have a bit of difficulty keeping larger plants in check; however, the consumer will be excited by more substantial plants. The Veranda series contains orange, pink, red and light pink colors.

Ecke, Fischer, Goldsmith and Yoder. I'd have to say the display at Ecke Ranch, Fischer USA, Goldsmith Seeds and Yoder Brothers this year was amazing. Huge topiaries, a towering pyramid of digitalis and great use of color combined to create excitement at this stop. Hope this group continues to work together next year, as their selection was amazing with all four companies in one location.

From Ecke the real show stopper for me was 'Sun Chimes Denim' diascia, peach/coral flower fading to a deep denim blue. I couldn't help thinking of it in mixed containers with gray or lime foliage. There is so much potential for unique color in diascia and nemesia, and we aren't seeing them because many believe they won't sell. I think this will be a great test, and kudos to Ecke for bringing it out. Also from Ecke was the Bahama pentas series. The series seems to have great branching and lots of color. And last of all, another plectranthus from the Longwood Gardens collection. 'Multi-Verde' is a robust, large-leaved, larger stature plant with two tones of green and white margins; of course, I think it is really nice!

Fischer had a lot of really new and exciting material on display as well. The Butterfly impatiens series has a unique flower form and produces a lot



Top: *Diascia 'Sun Chimes Denim'* (Ecke Ranch). **Bottom:** *Alternanthera 'Crème de Menthe'* (Yoder Brothers).

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of color for pots or baskets. I really liked the novelty of this series. They grow to a large size and really make an impact; the series includes red, pink, lavender and salmon with eye. I discussed Phoenix penstemon in last month's column; I think penstemon is about to boom as a crop. This series is leading the way for large flowers, strong flowering and great color. Another great Fischer introduction is the vinca Nirvana series. These are disease-resistant plants with a slightly trailing habit and come in white through purple and pink — some with eye and some solid colors.

Yoder Brothers has teamed up with Bobby Saul to bring a full series of alternanthera to the market. These plants follow along with the 'Party Time' release from a few years ago and have the same habit and form. The taxonomist in me still thinks these are iresine, but who cares? They are vigorous, colorful, heat tolerant and perform well in sun or shade. The series now includes 'Crème de Menthe' (white and green variegated with pink stems), 'Grenadine' (with pink veins on crimson leaves) and 'Cognac' (a deep burgundy).

Pacific Plug & Liner. At Pacific Plug & Liner there was the usual excellent mix of trials and new plants. Along with an exhaustive trial of osteospermum and

verbena (see page 32) Cohen, Hishtil, Jaldety and Schwartz had some incredible variations on old standards. 'Dancing Flame' salvia (*Salvia splendens*), from Hishtil, is very similar to salvia 'Van Houtii', reaching 3-4 feet in height. 'Dancing Flame' has boldly variegated leaves in bright yellow and deep green and vivid scarlet spikes. It was one of those plants you walk right up to in the greenhouse; it practically screams for your attention. This would be a great landscape plant across the Southern United States where these salvias are truly perennial. For Northern garden centers it will be an excellent novelty item and a real attention grabber.

On a subtler note, Jaldety's angelonia 'Zebra' requires you to get up close to see what a beautiful flower it has. Each blossom is streaked with deep blue, similar to the white and blue striped cultivars, but instead of white, the petals are a deep plum or rose and look like orchids. I have never seen this form of angelonia before. Plants seem to be of moderate vigor, not dwarf but not as robust as some other angelonia on the market.

Top: *Salvia* 'Dancing Flame' (Hishtil). **Bottom:** *Angelonia* 'Zebra'

Bodger Botanicals. Bodger Botanicals also kept up the interest for Pack Trials attendees with the introduction of the gerbera

Spinner series. The 10-inch-plus flowers on this phenomenal plant remind me of an old Aerosmith song. Until you see one you won't believe me anyway, but this is something seriously new. It will only work for local producers because the plant is large as well as the flowers and might be difficult to ship, so it will help smaller growers really establish a niche. A great introduction from a group well known for this kind of unique plant material!

S&G Flowers. S&G Flowers' big introduction for this year is the Spellbound impatiens series. A trailing or mounding series with very large, rich flowers and excellent branching so that plants grow sideways until they begin to mound up and form a canopy. Spellbound is a vegetative line of impatiens now in trial gardens (including the University of Florida's) around the United States. The series includes lilac, rose, salmon and white.

Ball FloraPlant. Ball FloraPlant had an excellent display and some really nice introductions. The first being the follow up to the very successful 'Perilla Magilla', 'Magilla Perilla Vanilla', a white and green form of this popular plant. Also new was iresine 'Blazin Rose', with the largest leaves I have ever seen on an iresine. The intense crimson and hot pink leaves and stems are really nice. This plant does best with some shade. Lastly, an improvement on one of the best "perennial" salvias of all time. 'Indigo Spires' has been an industry staple for years, but



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Ball remade the cross and introduced 'Mystic Spires Blue' with a really compact growth habit. 'Mystic Spires Blue' has the same beautiful blue flowers, but the stems are only half as long as the original hybrid.

Jackson & Perkins. The Suntory collection from Jackson & Perkins has such a rich history of the finest genetics, and their displays are always mind-boggling. Although it has nothing to do with bedding plants I was blown away by the *Paulownia tomentosa* trees growing behind the greenhouses, but back to business...The Violena series is a new vegetative line of violas with vigorous growth and a lot of color. These are not plants for small pots but best in larger containers and hanging baskets where they can spill over the edges. Hanging baskets were spectacular!

Speedling. Speedling California hosted a great show of new plant materials and new companies. GGG (Gruenewald) took its first stab at Pack Trials and was on hand to show a lot of great genetics in calibrachoa, nemesia, thunbergia, lantana and a host of other crops. What was really pleasing to see was tibouchina. The Princess series of tibouchina (Tropical, Latin and Paradise) is the first step I have seen toward improving this tropical for our industry. While the cool spring in California kept the plants from really blooming heavily you could see that these introductions were better branching and had larger, darker green leaves. The flowers of Tropical princess were 4-inches in diameter and deep violet purple. This genus has so much to offer; it was great to see a company getting started on improvements!

Northern Innovators was another new display. Its Klahanie hibiscus series expanded the tropical offerings this year. The series includes both single and double forms with some great colors. The extra-large flowers are a great signature crop for retailers looking for something different. It is great to see some the hibiscus hybrids finally beginning to break out.



Top: Gerbera 'Spinner Pink' (Bodger Botanicals). **Bottom:** Iresine 'Blazin Rose' (Ball FloraPlant).

SEED CROPS

I know my column is "Vegetative Matters," but I want to cover a couple of seed introductions that will be causing lots of change. As one person I spoke with said, "The Oscar for this year's Pack Trials has to go to PanAmerican Seed for introducing seed-produced angelonia, diascia and nemesia all in one year and then underplaying how profound these changes will be." Things will be changing for these three crops in the next few years. The plants in the Serena angelonia series are beautiful and free branching. The Diamonte diascia series is also an excellent introduction. The Poetry series of nemesia continues in the PanAmerican tradition of strong series and great growth habit. Hats off to PanAmerican for showing all of us in the vegetative industry that we can't rest on our laurels!

Well, that's it for me. I am excited about moving into industry, a bit sad to be leaving academia and totally stoked about finding new plants for our industry. I really wanted to say a very heartfelt thanks to the folks at GPN. Thanks for your patience, your enthusiasm and your time. Best of luck to all of you!

Rick Schoellhorn traveled with GPN as extension specialist at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla. He has now moved on to become director of new plants at Proven Winners. He can be reached by E-mail at rick@provenwinners.com.

Editor's Note: While we here at GPN are sad to see Rick retire from "Vegetative Matters," after talking to him about his new endeavors and his informing us on how "stoked" he is, we couldn't help but be completely happy for him. He has contributed so much to the magazine and to entertainment on long trips. We wish him the very best. Look for him periodically in GPN, as he

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