

# California Spring Trials: An Insider's Look

Each year hundreds of people make the trek to sunny California to view the latest and greatest plants and products in our industry at California Spring Trials (CAST). I have had the

pleasure of organizing this event for the Pacific Plug & Liner (PP&L) location for the past six years, so I have learned a lot along the way from plant scheduling to how to layout the show. Many may wonder, what really goes into an event like this and how can it be pulled off in the busiest time of year? Read on to get a brief recap of how we accomplish this at PP&L.

## MAKE A PLAN

Planning for Spring Trials starts early, as in we have already started planning for the 2018 event! The plants are the stars of the show, so we start extra early to ensure we have secured plant material we need to showcase. With the highlight of our show being perennials and specialty product, it is even more important to start early with the longer grow times

involved as opposed to annuals.

Cuttings are already being planted as early as July so liners can be potted in September to overwinter; specialty product like cordyline can take even longer. On top of normal scheduling, we trick some plants a bit to remain in bloom for the show by placing them in a cooler to hold the flowers. Other plants need just the opposite and require high light and warm temperatures in the dead of winter — all part of the great plan to have as many perennials showing as possible for one week during the year.

This year's event was a bit more complicated to plan as an all new layout was required. In 2015, we made the decision to move away from selling annual liners and focus more on perennial and specialty product. We wanted our Spring Trials event to reflect this strategy, so in 2017 the event got a major facelift.

We changed up vendors a bit to reflect our perennial focus and used more space to highlight PP&L's key programs and products by taking out shipping rail lines. We build the show from a blank slate in a greenhouse so I find that Microsoft Visio is a girl's best friend. This program will get all the dimensions squared away, but I still do a rough layout outside for some parts of the show because sometimes seeing it live is a better perspective than just on paper.

## KEEP ORGANIZED

This is a huge event for any company and especially production companies like PP&L since it occurs during the busiest times of year. CAST generally falls in our biggest ship weeks of the year and the show is in the shipping house, so we have to remain very organized to ensure the show goes on while

the business still operates smoothly. You are probably scratching your head, and asking, "Where did shipping go as I never see it at the show?"

They move to a location half the size of the show house, so things can get a little tight! I use the online project management software Basecamp to keep our team on task for Spring Trials setup. It is a tremendous tool to set deadlines and assign tasks, as the show setup requires many steps that must be done before others can start. If one team misses a deadline, everyone else will get delayed.

## HAVE FUN

To keep things fun and lighthearted for both PP&L staff during setup and attendees during their visit, I always try to come up with an entertaining theme to tie the whole experience together. This year's theme was camping, my personal favorite! We use themes to create an overall show look and feel but also to create learning experiences so various programs and plants will be memorable. This year we used merit badges as a tool to educate visitors on PP&L programs. Visitors got a passport book, which included spots to collect merit badges as they listened to information on various programs.

## THE FUTURE

The future of CAST at PP&L is to continue on the path to being the largest perennial stop on the circuit, providing visitors with both perennial education as well as inspiration. On the educational side of things, we hope to add to our perennial showcase so that visitors can see product from various breeders side by side, all grown at the same facility to get a true comparison of genetics. We also hope to bring more experts on perennials to the show floor; having our hellebore expert on site during the event was very helpful this year. For inspiration, what Spring Trials would be complete without lifestyle displays? They are fun to look at, of course, but hopefully they give retailers ideas for their own stores to help draw consumers in.

Perhaps the biggest complaint many have about Spring Trials is the date. Being in April, it is the busiest time of year for most growers, so I cannot agree more that the date should be moved as many people cannot attend or maybe are there in body but not mind. The question is, when? Earlier in the spring means earlier forcing of plants; with a perennial-focused product line like ours, the product would not look its best nor natural. Moving past April, other events start to interfere. So maybe it is time for a California Late Summer Trials? The weather is sunny yet temperatures are mild, a perfect escape from the heat and humidity of most places that time of year — some food for thought. [gpn](#)



*April Herring-Murray is new product development and marketing manager for Pacific Plug & Liner, and member of GPN's 40 Under 40 Class of 2015. She can be reached at [aprilh@ppandl.net](mailto:aprilh@ppandl.net).*