

Industry Innovations: Giving Gardeners an Upgrade

I have always been your atypical plant nerd. A passion for plants was the reason I picked a career in horticulture to begin with. I laugh when I think back about my original ideas of what I wanted to do and where I am today and how different they turned out to be.

My original career plan was to go a more academic route and run a botanical garden, assembling collections and curiosities from around the globe. Where I ended up today is a more commercial and somewhat corporate route facilitating the development and launch of great new varieties with a team of class-A plant breeders and marketing professionals. That original passion for plants, regardless of what path I took, still remains core to what I do and the excitement around what's new continues to motivate me.

The great thing about a passion for new products is that it is aligned with an overall industry need for new products. Much like in fashion, consumer electronics and other industries, flowers are no different. Each year, it's all about what's new and the industry — and breeders in particular — partake in an annual road show of their new introductions from fall retail meetings to California Spring Trials on into the sweltering summer field trials to see how their varieties hold up in trial gardens across America.

Anyone who has ever traveled to, or let alone conducted, a stop on the California Spring Trials knows the importance of new launches and the importance of getting that first impression right for growers, brokers and industry.

Fortunately for our industry, the genetic potential of flowers continues to deliver and amaze us every year. Whether it be Mother Nature doing it on her own or from a solid assist in a capable breeder's hands, new varieties and plant breeding continue to up the game of plants and what they can do for growers and the end consumers.

A MAJOR EFFORT

Often as a marketer and developer of new products you struggle with balancing the desire to launch truly innovative game-changing genetics with the reality of introducing new and improved but not necessarily novel or step change genetics. Ultimately, innovative products are what every breeding company wants but they take a lot of work, time and resources to become a commercial reality.

For every innovative product, you have a long line of basic line extensions. The likelihood of creating and launching an innovative product that will stand the test of time is in fact quite rare. One can probably count the step change products that have really made an impact on our industry in the past two decades

on two hands. That goes to show that even though the genetic potential of plants is amazing, it still takes a major effort to bring it into a commercially viable product.

Innovation can take many forms. Most consumer innovations get the press and the buzz, items like an ever-blooming sunflower or an impatiens that takes the sun. Much of what we do, however, is quietly in the background continuing to improve bread-and-butter genetics with bigger flowers, better habits, more intense colors and overall upgrading the genetic package giving customers something way better than what they grew for the past 20 years.

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BREAKTHROUGHS IN GERANIUMS

Take geraniums, a classic product that was changed dramatically through innovative interspecific breeding well over a decade ago. What it brought to the table was a geranium that had redder reds, bigger flowers and much better garden performance. As an industry this category has taken off and continues to grow and become more important for growers and retailers.

From a consumer standpoint they continue to grow in popularity and one would argue that many traditional gardeners know them by name. But your everyday consumer is buying it because it's that red geranium they buy every year and this one just looks better on the bench compared to its zonal relative sitting next to it.

The market for new products and innovative products in particular continue to drive my passion for plants and horticulture in general. And fortunately for me, our industry's thirst for new products allows me to geek out on new breeding and varieties year after year. But most importantly our industry would not survive on innovation alone; for every Sun this and Super that you have a Red Improved this and Blue Improved that, which continue to service our customers with great genetics that continually upgrade the end consumer experience whether they realize it or not. *gpn*



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