

# The Journey Continues

As All-America Selections celebrates its 89th anniversary in 2021, the organization continues to innovate to meet the changing needs of the industry.



BY DIANE BLAZEK

When I was invited to write this article about the recent changes at All-America Selections, the song "What's New?" from the 1930s was stuck in my mind.

Here's the first verse:

*What's new?* (So many things! Read on to find out.)  
*How is the world treating you?* (Well, 2020 was a bit rough.)  
*You haven't changed a bit* (Yes, we have!)  
*Lovely as ever I must admit* (Uh, yes, we admit many of our AAS Winners are quite lovely!)

This song was written around the same time that All-America Selections (AAS) was founded in between the two world wars. Yes, AAS is celebrating its 89th anniversary this year and that alone is worth recognition! But there are so many new things worth sharing.

AAS continues to build on our basics: a non-profit, independent organization that anonymously trials new, never-before-sold varieties that are judged by volunteer horticulture experts.

For years, the industry has supported our mission because of what AAS brings to breeders, brokers, growers, retailers and consumers. It's a brand promise that says an AAS Winner was tested across North America and has proven itself to be better than the industry standards that were used as comparisons.

## WHAT'S NEW?

Thanks to an innovative board of directors, here are some of the changes AAS has recently implemented:

- The addition of trial types to adapt to today's needs.
- The changing of entry rules to accommodate today's breeding timelines.
- The use of a new app for our trial judges to record their scores.
- The addition of Introduction Gardens.

Here are some of the details on the newly implemented changes.

**Addition and adaptation of trial types.** Many will remember the AAS Trials of yore when there were only seed trials: one for annuals and one for vegetables. Well, that has really changed! Not only did we add trials for non-seed items several years ago, but we also added trials for perennials.

Now, in 2021, we've added container trials. Containers are here to stay and so many new genetics are designed just for containers and hanging

baskets so AAS is staying relevant and up to date with these trial additions. Here are all the AAS trial categories with the newest ones in bold:

- Ornamentals from seed, trialed in-ground
- **Ornamentals from seed, trialed in containers**
- Ornamentals, non-seed, trialed in-ground
- **Ornamentals, non-seed, trialed in containers**
- Edibles trialed in-ground
- **Edibles trialed in containers**
- Perennials trialed in-ground
- **Other/special circumstances** – This one is not as self-explanatory, but it means that we will try to adapt and be flexible to almost all special requests. A seed breeder may want their varieties trialed against vegetative varieties. A vegetable breeder may want to trial a perennial vegetable such as asparagus. No matter what, AAS is open to new suggestions and will try to find a trial to suit almost any circumstance.

**Entry rule change.** It used to be that entries into the AAS Trials had to be "new, never-before-sold" and had to stay that way throughout the trial up to the date of introduction. The new rule is "new, never-before-sold as of the entry deadline," which means any variety can be entered into the AAS Trials then can go into commerce while that variety is in trial. It will still be an anonymous trial, but the breeder will not have to wait until the trial is completed to begin selling that product.

In fact, for breeders who like to offer exclusives, the entered variety can be an exclusive with any one broker or retailer while the variety is in trial. However, the breeder cannot mention any association with AAS until after the trial results are in and their entry is announced as an AAS Winner. After the trial is completed, and assuming it scores high enough to be an AAS Winner, then it can no longer be exclusive to any one retail outlet.

**There's an app for that.** We are now using the Mercado trial app for judges to submit their scores. Gone are the days of filling in page after page (or tab after tab) on an Excel file. Now the AAS office uploads all the trial details to the app, then our judges download the Mercado app, enter interim scores based on the date of their garden evaluation and press the Sync button when they are in wi-fi range.

At the end of the season, we ask for one final score that is submitted by the deadline for their trial and that's it! Any judge who wants to use paper can always print the description sheets we send them, but this new way





Darwin Perennials' echinacea 'Sombrero Baja Burgundy' was one of two winners in AAS' first three-winter herbaceous perennial trial.



Zinnia 'Profusion Red Yellow Bicolor' from Sakata is the latest AAS Gold Medal winner and the first in 17 years!



The trials gardens at Colorado State University.

is much faster and easier. Plus, every judge can take and submit as many photos as they want via the app. That makes it much easier for the AAS office to see what the judges saw and share those images with the breeders.

**A garden of opportunity.** Because AAS was originally just a seed organization, we have a long-standing tradition of working with breeders, seed companies and brokers as trial judges. And as a non-profit, we have a strong relationship with the universities who conduct trials. Public gardens are another strong supporter and participant in our trialing program.

An area that has expanded in recent years is our partnership with larger growers throughout the country. Not only are they trial judges, but also AAS Ambassadors, as they promote the varieties they've seen in the AAS Trials to their customers. The newest addition for AAS is the launch of the "Introduction Garden" program with growers and universities who hold summer trials and open houses for the industry. The last two years of AAS Winners are at these locations so summer visitors can view them along with the other new introductions and make their choices for the coming year.

Right now, these are the AAS judges who are also growers, but we are interested in talking with other big growers to see if there might be a fit:

- D.S. Cole Growers
- Costa Farms
- Mast Young Plants
- Metrolina Greenhouses
- Moss Greenhouses
- Nature's Best Nursery
- Raker-Roberta's Young Plants
- Smith Gardens
- Vanstone Nursery
- Welby Gardens
- Young's Plant Farm

For a list of judges, go to the AAS website, then click on the "AAS Winners" tab and then "Judges' Biographies".

These are the Introduction Gardens in our beta test for this program:

- Ball Horticultural Company
- Bayer/Seminis
- Colorado State University
- Fessler Nursery
- Mast Young Plants
- Raker-Roberta's Young Plants
- Rutgers Cooperative Extension
- Seeds By Design
- Smith Gardens
- Welby Gardens
- Young's Plant Farm

For complete details about each event (pending COVID restrictions), go to: [www.all-americanselections.org/aas-introduction-gardens](http://www.all-americanselections.org/aas-introduction-gardens). If you have an industry event and are interested in showcasing the last two years of AAS Winners, please contact me at [dblazek@aaswinners.com](mailto:dblazek@aaswinners.com).

## THE CONSUMER CONNECTION

The last thing to point out is not new but is certainly continuing as a very important part of the AAS mission — direct-to-consumer outreach. By working with our sister organization, National Garden Bureau, we now have a community of over 100,000 consumers to which we can provide gardening information, tips and inspiration. AAS Winners are a key component in that messaging as the story of how an AAS Winner gets that recognition is a great one to share. Our website gets frequent updates and is very accommodating to consumers looking to buy AAS Winners or looking for more details.

By working with various social media influencers, we are increasing our reach and awareness in ways that weren't possible in prior years. A silver lining from the COVID pandemic is that virtual seminars are an easier way to broaden our reach to both industry and consumer audiences.

The other silver lining is that the interest in gardening is at an all-time high! What better story is there than a trialed and tested variety that is easy to grow? We are happy to share that news with all the newbie gardeners to help ensure their foray into gardening is a successful one, which it can be with the help of AAS Winners. ■

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