

Landscaping — The New Way



By Roger C. Styer

With the summer almost half gone, I suppose this is a good time to talk about how the spring season went for those of you who deal with landscapers, or for those of you thinking about dealing with landscapers. This is a different market segment than dealing with homeowners; that's for sure. But in many ways they are the same. Sounds confusing, doesn't it? Well, let's see if we can make some sense out of this.

SIMILARITIES

First, let's look at how landscapers are similar to homeowners. They want their plants in full color and at the cheapest price possible, and they tend to buy the same thing over and over. If you take advance orders from landscapers, you know that they want their plants at a specific date, generally after all frost is past. Landscapers are paid by the job and bid every project. That means they want the cheapest plants they can get. This usually forces growers to provide smaller plants in cell-packs instead of 4-inch pots. They want beds to fill in fast and have great color for as long as possible, but they often do not want to space plants close together to get that color. When landscapers find plants that work well for them, they tend to stick with them year in and year out. There are limited choices

for plants that will tolerate the extreme weather common in many parts of the country. So many times, landscapers do not know what could work until they see someone else do it. Kind of like your neighbors, isn't it?

DIFFERENCES

Landscapers need more plants at a time than any homeowner would, so they tend to place large orders for a few crops for the specific dates they need. That means you have to do a good job of scheduling. If the weather does not cooperate, you have to sit on those plants for a while but still keep blooms looking good for when the landscaper wants them. That can really throw off your space planning, shipping and sales. Additionally, landscapers may want specific varieties and will not tolerate substitutions. Many times, those varieties are not ones you would normally grow for your other customers. You may find it difficult to get enough good seed, plugs or cuttings to satisfy the orders. Because of all this, you should be getting money down for landscaper orders, generally 50 percent, with the rest due at pick up. Finally, landscapers generally stick with seed varieties, especially in cell-packs, whereas homeowners are planting less in the ground and asking for larger sizes. Additionally, perennials are still much more important for landscaping than vegetative annuals.

BETTER SERVICE

I think the landscaper market can use a lot more attention from growers. It takes a lot of effort to educate them about plant selection, combinations, crop rotation, soil preparation, insect and disease control, and what varieties will work. And that does not even touch watering or mulching! I know there are a number of good landscapers out there who do a great job, but there are also some who could use some help. Do you provide any? How are you helping them be successful now and in the years to

come? Here are some ideas on how to help your landscaper customers:

- introduce new items to them every year,
- try growing 4-inch pots instead of cell-packs,
- help them with soil preparation and pest control, and
- introduce them to mixed combinations and hanging baskets.

For new introductions, take some of your landscape customers to nearby field trials at universities or seed/plant companies. During your visit, go over new crops, new combinations and different color schemes. Take good notes on how plants are holding up to Mother Nature. Show your landscape customers how these plants will flower, fill in and hold up. Landscapers are especially interested in low-maintenance plants, meaning no dead-heading or cleaning up. If you can't take them to the trials, take good pictures to show with catalogs and other information well in advance of ordering for next season.

Putting together better combinations in large pots or baskets will require the same effort as attending trials and getting information from sales people. But the effort is well worth it! You want your landscape customers to come to you and ask what is new for this year, just like your homeowner customers. Work with them to give their customers reliable color, low maintenance and variety. Help educate your landscapers about preparing the soil, controlling insects and diseases, and cutting costs. After all, we are in the service business, just like them. By helping your landscape customers, you truly can make the world a more beautiful place and make a profit, too! **[GPN]**

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