

Growing and Marketing Herbaceous Natives

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INTRODUCTION

The utilization of native plants, in the case of this paper, herbaceous forbs and grasses, has been very popular over the last several years. They are utilized in natural area restoration work; and highway, corporate, and residential landscape projects. Native plants should be considered as an addition to a nurseries production scheme. This paper discusses the methods that are used by the author to grow and subsequently market this type of plant material.

There is no denying that the perennial plant market is at this time, capturing a significant share of the wholesale and retail sales in the horticulture industry. The relative ease of perennial propagation, rapid turnaround in production time, and wide appeal in sales, make this product line worth investing in. With regards to native plants, or in the case of this paper, Midwestern woodland and grassland perennials, they are able to be utilized in various ways to achieve customer sales, and subsequent return sales. This type of plant material is excellent for where a low maintenance situation is to be incorporated. Some examples are: parking lot buffer areas, large-scale perennial plantings, and renaturalizing plantings in certain housing situations. These endemic plants offer nearly four seasons of usability for the landscape, they are in most cases, not hampered with significant disease or insect infestation, and they do not require extensive man hours of labor, once they become established.

PROPAGATION

Many of these plants can be readily grown from seed. They also can be propagated from stem and root cuttings, and by simple division. Their root systems will readily grow in the soilless container mixes that are standard in the industry today. Natives also will do well in many of the specialized tray and pot systems that are in use by growers. I, myself, utilize a variation of the popular pine bark and compost-based mix. I use a just-in-time system for obtaining my potting mix, and work with my local supplier to get a "fine tuned" mix for my production scheme. In some cases, plants are sold directly in the plug trays. Otherwise, I use either Anderson band pots or 1-gal plastic containers, after transplanting from plug trays, to grow plants to a finished product. So much for growing perfect plants, now that you have them, you have to sell them.

MARKETING

If you grow them, will they sell? So often people begin to grow particular plants, or want to get into what's trendy. In many cases, they later wonder what to do with their plants at the end of the season. The concept of marketing is not new, but what stymies people is how to market the service or product they have. In many cases, we rely upon existing customers to utilize our products. A recurring customer can be influenced easier into buying new products and services because they are already

familiar with your companies' product and service record. How then, do you reach out to new people, and thereby increase your market share, or reach out to those existing customers who may not have purchased from you in a while?

SELLING

First off, you should define what your goal in the market place is. Having plants that look good, does not mean that those plants will automatically sell for you. Why are you growing these plants, who will use them, what portion of you business do they account for? You should be asking yourself these questions along with another important point, what are your customers looking for. You must make it your point to know as much of your customers business as you can.

On a commercial level, the act of selling is not the end of a business dealing, but the beginning. With wholesale customers, they are looking for you, and you must be ready to deal with them. Retail consumers may never see you, or your product, and a retail sale is usually the end of the deal. When you enter into a wholesale relationship, you are hopefully beginning a long-term affair with your client. Buying habits in this business tend to be along seasonal lines, and in many cases, customers may project buying with regards to economic or contractual forecasts. Contractors may have a project which takes months or even longer to complete. Other growers who buy from you, may be projecting their crops on a yearly, or multiple-year schedule. You must be able to forecast this. (Sometimes we are guessing, and when we are right, we can claim to be successful).

ADVERTISING

When you want people to utilize your company and services tell them and make your message clear. If you're a specialist in growing a certain plant, make that point known. *An example of native prairie plants would be their hardiness, or their ability to survive a drought.* This is a key selling point. Customers don't need to be constantly dead heading, spraying for insects can be a minimal chore, and they are long-lived landscape or garden inhabitants. You can give examples of species adaptability to wet or dry conditions, report on their cold or heat tolerance. With regards to woodland species, they can be utilized along with early blooming bulbs to give color to the landscape in early and mid spring. In addition, you should remember, that these ephemerals go dormant by June, so that subsequent plantings of summer or even fall blooming plants, may be incorporated into the same garden area.

These are some key elements that will help sell this type of plant material. Remember, you are selling to people on a personal level, be armed with as much information as possible. The key to successful sales is not only what you know about the product you sell, but also what you know about the customer you are selling to. Many people hear the word native used in connection with plants, but they may be unfamiliar with what this really means. Can they use this type of plant material? To help you increase sales, you can host an informational seminar at your company. Provide visual and written aids to prospective buyers. Offer job-related facts for installing and maintaining this type of plant material. Provide either county or state guidelines for planting native plants. Do you have a demonstration planting area at your nursery? Are the plants there clearly marked? You can provide a sales person who can handle specific questions on native plants. You have to be accessible, return phone calls as soon as possible, and don't let that sale get away.

THE BEST MEDIA SOURCE

What can you put into your customers' hands that will help them keep you and your company in the front of their minds. With a printable format, the tradition has been the catalog. Followed up later in the year with mailings. In many cases, your mailing may get less than a second of time in someone's hands, before it's lost in the recycling bin. A quarterly report, in the form of newsletter, or brochure, has a better chance of staying around. You are looking at several weeks at best, of staying in people's minds, when you use printed materials. Direct contact has been, and still is one of the best tools for business-to-business sales. Utilize your fax machine to "direct mail" the people you need to reach. Include a coupon with the fax, or just with fax orders. This is another way to attract people who may not regularly trade with you. The newest tool is the internet. This can be your 24-h employee, with catalog lists, sales items, product availability, and the ability to take orders after normal business hours. Remember, product, quality, and service, all go hand in hand. Maintain a high level in each of these areas, and you will succeed, but you must be willing to work at it.

ADDITIONAL READING

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