

## Lusting for the New — Is There a Market Beyond Branding?®

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### INTRODUCTION

The logistics and talent to propagate a hundred thousand or more of a plant is mind boggling to me. One hundred or less is within my experience. With very limited numbers and a premium price, we have found success with new introductions to our customers. Just selecting marketable plants is a challenge in itself. In this talk I wish to point out some plants and qualities that I've found customers yearn to have and how we have lured them to buy — without branding. Branding definitely profits those who find or create a winner. But it takes big numbers and lots of money to support and advertise this kind of venture. Not all of us have the wherewithal to pull this off. For sure, hot “new” plants draw customers and keep you on their radar screens.

Money is the bottom line in all our efforts. If the retail customer isn't interested, the money stops flowing all the way back down the horticultural line. Our job in retail is to make our customers delirious — well, satisfied — with their purchase and hopefully increase their interest to return for more. Retailers' sales depend on receiving excellent plant material including the right information for the hardiness zone and climate in which it will be grown in the ground.

We promote the best time to plant trees, shrubs, and perennials (in the ground) in our area is late fall through winter. However this is the very time a customer may have to select among “twigs” in containers. With such names as ‘Autumn Blaze’ and ‘Florida Flame’, a customer's imagination is truly stretched. They want to believe you — but will that twig really become a tree and in how many years? Signs help give pertinent information salesmen might not even know. It behooves all involved in producing a new plant to provide as much useful, customer-friendly information as possible if we want to sell it. Consider your wholesale salesmen taking what's new to a retail nursery employee meeting for a preview. What an opportunity to foster excitement among those who sell this material to the public.

About 15 years ago, I planted a shumard oak that was initially destined for the compost pile. Its life in an 11-L (3-gal) container had been distressed; it was a non-salable “Charlie Brown” tree. Within a very few years, it grew into a very nice shade tree — just what many of our customers desire in our unrelenting hot summers. They watched this one grow large and handsome and could readily visualize what a dormant 11-L (3-gal) containerized shumard or nuttall oak would become. A prominently planted specimen becomes a “silent” salesman.

Likewise, perennial flowers go dormant at the very time we encourage planting them. It's a hard sell convincing a customer to buy a container with no visible flowers. Digital photography makes it possible for both grower and the retailer to “sell” dormant plants. Inventories written with highly descriptive language trump simple specs, but pictures are worth a thousand words. Too often a new plant will not sell solely because your retail buyer does not have a clue what it is or what it looks like in its mature state. Its botanical name may add to the mystery. You will increase

your sales if you can provide a picture of what the containerized plant promises to become. Are you familiar with *Dianthera nodosa*? This is a good example of a perennial probably not widely known. With its picture, you can clearly see its flower power and growth habit. This is certainly more impressive than listing or verbalizing its botanical name.

*Odontonema cuspidatum*, which is commonly called fire spike or cardinal's guard, exemplifies what customers want. It thrives in sun or shade and produces showy red inflorescences over a long period in late summer and fall. Its glossy green foliage makes a good foil for shorter perennials. Hummingbirds are attracted to it. It is pest free and easy to maintain. Once established, it tolerates drought relatively well. Customers want something pretty, useful, and easy to grow and maintain. They need to know why they should buy it, how to use it, and how to make it thrive. Communicating what makes a product so wonderful is the key to selling new material.

The market for hydrangeas is huge. Everyone has jumped into this honey pot. More and more cultivars are appearing. But how many is enough? Dr. Gary Knox at the University of Florida, North Florida Research & Education Center, has a huge hydrangea collection, some remontant, some not, which are planted out for trialing. I visited at the tail end of the heaviest flowering season and unscientifically noted that H. 'Mrs. Blackburn', a cutting taken from a local Quincy, Florida, garden, seemed to be the best performer. Branded taxa in our steamy climate have been disappointing in their performance during this past extraordinarily dry year. However, evaluation over several years will separate the real winners. There is room for new unusual ones that retain clean foliage and have recurring flowers, but maybe this market is close to saturation. An informal survey confirms blue mopheads outsell all others. Tallahassee Nurseries had over 23 hydrangea cultivars last spring; what sold was whatever was blooming, but blue mopheads led sales by far. The big question is will retail customers come back to buy enough of these new unusual cultivars to warrant the sales space?

Likewise, loropetalums stormed onto the horticultural scene. Now that they are ubiquitous in our area, new uses are going to be needed to keep them marketable. Here is an example in Orlando, Florida, of using them as a low hedge in a commercial setting.

Do you remember Allen Bush's Holbrook Farms here in North Carolina? Once a week he cleverly gave tours of his beautifully maintained display gardens. After which you bought as many 4-inch or 1-gal perennials as money or car space would allow. It was here that we first saw *Abelia chinensis*; growing into a small tree with cascading branches and terminal white flower clusters, it makes a very nice choice as a small "patio" tree. But in the container it often looks unremarkable next to *A. × grandiflora*. Take a picture of it flowering for your customers and be sure to promote it for its outstanding cut flowers and as an excellent species for attracting butterflies.

*Pittosporum* shrubs are a little like junipers, useful but somewhat boring. However, they can be pruned into attractive small trees. New uses can revitalize old plant material.

A Mexican manager at a Greensboro, Florida, wholesale nursery grows on the side 11-L (3-gal) spineless opuntias, which he sells to many Mexicans in the area who primarily use them for cooking. These opuntias are attractive, different, and salable. Perhaps we should look for more plants with specific ethnic interests in

mind. Our area has many Mexican, Asian, and Caribbean groups who are also customers and have money to spend on products they want. Edibles often are ornamental but may be overlooked by growers. We have enjoyed good sales with ornamental peppers as an example.

There is a renaissance of rhizomatous, angel wing, cane and hybridized begonias. What beautiful and varied flowers and foliage they have! While some are hardy when planted in the landscape in North Florida, they make excellent container specimens performing over a long season. I see this market continuing to grow because they bring customer satisfaction and are a great show for their cost.

Some genera are avoided because there are thugs in their ranks. For example, clerodendrums in Florida have a bad reputation caused by a few species. Their flowers are alluring, while their growth habit is aggressive to seriously invasive. No grower wants to promote a rogue. Dr. Rick Schoellhorn insisted I take cuttings from his 2.4-m (8-ft) specimen, *Clerodendrum wallichii*, which had not flowered. Trusting this would not be a wandering ogre, I soon was awed by its magnificent flowers in October. It defies the reputation of the genus, having never seeded and spread, but reliably flowering with appealing dark green foliage and a narrow upright growth habit. You may be overlooking some great species because you avoid certain genera.

The north is beginning to embrace more tropical plants. Flamboyant and often unique, they have attracted new fans and good sales despite many lacking cold hardiness. Basjoo banana withstands cold, I have heard, all the way to Connecticut. It goes dormant wherever freezes occur, but returns reliably to Zone 7. My introduction to this came from a teensy plug from Agri-Starts, who would guess this would turn into a colony of 5-m (16-ft) giants. Edith Edelman's use of "bodacious" aptly describes this. You may remember she is another North Carolinian and renowned perennial garden designer. Perhaps shipping constrictions may be a reason more growers shun this ornamental banana. Tissue culture has revolutionized access to the tropical world, providing growers with the kind of numbers they need to even bother with growing a specific crop.

Some gingers, which can be easily shipped, are still not very visible on the market. These tropicals certainly fill a niche in the heat of late summer through early fall. They are stunning.

Alan Shapiro of Grandiflora Nursery introduced me to *Aloysia virgata*, sweet almond bush. I am very impressed with its vigor and terminal fragrant white inflorescences flushing over a very long flowering period. Our customers love fragrant plants. With proper pruning, it can be sized to a very nice landscape specimen of 1.8 to 2.1 m (6 to 7 ft). Furthermore, the foliage feels like sandpaper.

Mahonias are gaining more interest with breeders and growers. *Mahonia gracilipes*, originally from Heronswood Nurseries, has beautiful blue-green foliage with tiny pink flowers in early fall. It is a very handsome ornamental. Awareness of this and other new mahonias are definitely worth considering for new crops.

Bulbs are, I am sure, expensive to grow and sell. But if you want to try this, you will need to encourage your retail clients to plant some in their display areas or a highly visible municipal park. Three lycoris bulbs (white, red, or yellow) in a bulb pan will certainly sell when flowering. And price them for the specialty they are. For years, a retired local man has grown *Scadoxus multiflorus* (syn. *Haemanthus multiflorus*) in 3.7-L (1-gal) containers, selling at retail for \$6.99 each. All of them

sell. What can you buy today for as little as \$6.99 that will continue to bring pleasure for years to come? More attention from breeders and growers is being paid to crocosmias. ‘Walberton Yellow’ seems to have an edge on many of the cultivars available; the genus has loads of potential. They’re colorful with good sword-like foliage in contrast to so many other perennials.

Vines usually grow so quickly they can become a labor-intensive nightmare for the grower not to mention the logistics of shipping. But more and more people are living in condos or smaller houses, where vertical gardening is a good choice, and vines are an excellent option. Two vines worth noting for their color, vigor, and overall showiness are *Thunbergia grandiflora* ‘Variegata’ and *Mascagnia macrop-tera*. Vines deserve a closer look by industry.

Color pots are over the top. Boldly colored nursery containers can detract from what is really being sold. Recycling colored cans with branding hasn’t worked well yet in our area. Monrovia Growers is taking back their Monrovia pots and perhaps others are too. A biodegradable container might be one answer. I believe customers want to be dazzled primarily by the plants themselves.

Visit and evaluate plant material at your local university and commercial trial gardens. There is vast knowledge to be had and new potential winners. How fortunate we have been to have our palette of plants hugely expanded by passionate horticulturists like Drs. Dirr, Armitage, Knox, Bowden, Rick Schoellhorn, the late J.C. Raulston, and many others. Their generosity has spread excitement and new possibilities for all of us.