

## New Product Introductions the Fairweather's Way®

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New plant introductions are of vital economic value to the horticultural industry because they enable nurseries and retailers to add additional profit margin. New plants also often provide a royalty income to breeders which supports future development. Retail buyers and their customers are continually offered new and improved non-plant products so they have come to expect regular new plant products too.

Historically, some new plant introductions have failed to live up to their promise so have given wholesale growers and retailers a bad reputation and lost them large sums of money. Invariably such failure has resulted from lack of trialling before commercial launch. New plant introductions have often been added to nurseries' ranges on the hunch of the owner or member of the sales team, without consultation with customers or sufficient testing of the plant either through the production system or for its garden or landscape performance.

As a liner nursery Fairweather's has, for a number of years, recognised the value that new plants brought to the business and its customers. We have learned from experience that considerable financial costs can be incurred when significant volumes of a new plant are built up, only to recognise prior to launch that the plant is under-performing and would be best withdrawn from production. In other cases the life of a new plant in the market may have been short lived because of poor sales or problems with production, preventing us from recovering our investment in stock plants and damaging our reputation.

### DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW PLANT INTRODUCTION PROCESS

In 2004 we took the decision to review our process for new plant introductions in order to identify an efficient and thorough approach to new plants' evaluation. Fairweather's had recently used The Manufacturing Advisory Service to assist with the implementation of "lean management" in its business operations, making significant savings in cost and productivity improvements. It was therefore decided to apply the same "lean principles" (Whittemore 2006) to our new plant introduction process.

As nursery growers we had over many years developed a reputation as keen plant lovers and therefore attracted offers of potential new plants from breeders, agents, and customers for evaluation. These spent varying periods of time on the nursery receiving different degrees of attention prior to launch or rejection. After the "lean" exercise, we asked certain members of staff to form a "new plant group" whose job is to evaluate the likelihood of potential new plants making it to market before the company embarks on nursery trials.

Each plant is evaluated against the following criteria:

- Expected sales quantity
- Projected profitability for the product
- Production facilities required
- Skills required
- Availability of material
- Whether the plant has been tested for garden performance

For plants to pass this evaluation they have to achieve a minimum score, based on a combination of the above factors.

**Nursery Trials.** All new plants released by Fairweather's must have been through garden performance trials, either in our own trial field or at a known location of which one of the Fairweather's team has access. The garden performance trials are planted out at the same time as small-scale production trials begin. The field trials allow us to establish "garden-worthiness" and hardiness as well as providing a location for photography (e.g., for labels and marketing materials) and a site where customers can see plants in development.

Having passed the initial evaluation 25 plants of the potential new introduction are propagated as plugs, with detailed records kept of their cultural requirements. These plugs are grown on into P9 liners and then five of them are potted into 2- or 3-L containers. This enables us to carry out a thorough trial of the plant's nursery production performance without having to propagate and grow too much stock. It also provides us with a production blueprint which we can share with our grower customers.

Monthly reviews take place on the progress of all new plants but particular emphasis is placed on plants that have been projected to achieve the highest sales volumes and greatest potential profitability.

The decision to introduce a new plant is often best left to our customers providing they have decided that the plant can return a profit. We therefore invite customers to score the likelihood that they would grow our potential new plants at our annual Open Day and during customer visits. In addition, we receive a monthly visit from a "focus group" of consumers — some of whom are keen gardeners others who are impulse buyers. This group also scores the likelihood that they would buy the plants and they are asked to compare the potential new selections with similar existing ones, and suggest the price they would pay. Alongside these external scores our own nursery team is asked to score plants taking into account different criteria such as success of propagation and ease of production.

While average scores per plant are the primary benchmark we also take account of any differences in scoring to ensure that different groups of visitors do not hold strongly differing views about the likely success of the plant. Scores are shared with the breeders of the plants so that discussions can take part at an early stage as to whether plants should be submitted for Plant Breeders Rights and if so what the level of royalty should be, as this will have an impact on the liner plant price and therefore the price point at which the retailer will sell.

**Commercial Trials.** Once we have decided to proceed with a new plant, a commercial trial batch of up to 500 plants is produced for testing with a range of customers. Their feedback will determine the scale of commercial production. In principle we try to avoid offering new plants to customers on an exclusive basis, especially if we are collecting a royalty for the plant's breeder. This reduces the risk that the customer drops the plant from their range when there are no others growers with experience of it. We therefore seek partners to launch the plant into all sectors of the market — mail order, retail shows, independent garden centres, and retail nurseries.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Whittemore, J. 2006. Application of lean manufacturing to nursery stock production at Johnsons of Whixley. Comb. Proc. Intl. Plant Prop. Soc. 56:188–191.