

The History of the Texas Superstar Program[®]

Greg Grant

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Smith County, 1517 West Front Street, Suite 116

Tyler, Texas 75702, USA

E-mail: greg.grant@ag.tamu.edu

Texas Superstar[®] <http://texassuperstar.com/> is a marketing assistance program that involves the promotion of outstanding plants that have proven performance in most regions of Texas. From the beginning, this program has been a partnership of the Texas A&M University Agriculture Program (AgriLife Extension and Research) and the Texas nursery industry. Individuals with long-time involvement in the program include: Brent Pemberton, Mike Arnold, Cynthia McKenney, David Rodriguez, and Larry Stein

Only the most reliable and best-looking plants are included. The criteria for selecting a Texas Superstar[®] plant include: 1) must be attractive and useful to the gardening public; 2) must be unique and offer desirable and ornamental characteristics (i.e., the ability to perform in the heat of Texas summers or pest resistance) not usually available in commonly sold plants; 3) must consistently perform well for most Texas consumers regardless of their gardening expertise and growing locations; 4) must be as pest resistant as possible (deer proof is an added bonus); 5) must be able to be propagate and mass-produce in sufficient numbers to meet consumer demand; and 6) preferably is so attractive in the sales container that it “sells itself” to consumers - who have never heard of the attributes of the plant.

Conservatively, Texas Superstar[®] marketing promotions are estimated via informal surveys of producers to have increased sales at the major wholesaler level

by \$15 million. This does not include value-added components or smaller wholesaler production.

Texas is a climatic microcosm of much of the United States. The state spans four USDA hardiness zones, has 15 unique land resource areas and eight major soil orders. The annual precipitation rate ranges from 203mm (8 in.) per year in the far west to 1422 mm (56 in.) per year in the far east. The trial sites for the program are in College Station, Lubbock, Overton, and San Antonio. These sites represent major differences in ecological zones near the majority of the population centers in the state. The Texas Superstar[®] Executive Board makes all decisions concerning plants selected for trialing or designated for promotion – which are based on trial site performance. All the members of the executive board are actively involved in acquiring new and improved plant materials for the program.

The Texas Superstar[®] program grew out of regional marketing promotions coordinated by Dr. Jerry Parsons in the San Antonio region in the 1980s. From the beginning, these promotions of plants with proven performance were coordinated with industry to insure an adequate retail supply at the time of the promotion. In 1989, the first statewide marketing promotion was accomplished featuring the Texas bluebonnet. By the mid-1990s, the acronym CEMAP (Coordinated Education and Marketing Assistance Program) was used for the program. In 1997, the term Texas Superstar[®] was coined by the Executive Board. All promotions were retroactively designated Texas Superstar[®] plants. Texas Superstar[®] was trademarked at the time. Later, the trademark was registered, and the rights were

assigned to the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station (now Texas AgriLife Research). In 1998, Texas Superstar[®] tags were first used; \$0.05 per tag sold was designated for the program. Horticultural Marketing and Printing (Mesquite, TX) helped develop the brand by donating artwork and the patent search. Wal-Mart (Bentonville, Arkansas) purchased the first tags. The tag revenue is used to support all aspects of the program, as approved by the Executive Board.

By the mid-2000s, changes began to challenge the viability of the program. Tag sales were declining, and some key personnel left the program because of other pursuits, retirement, or health considerations. However, recent changes and additions to the Executive Board have helped the program remain viable and to begin a renewal of industry partnerships and a campaign to increase consumer awareness in the program. In 2009, the Texas Department of Agriculture greatly increased activity in partnership with the Go Texan Program. The Texas Superstar[®] brochure originally created in 1999 with the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association is updated every two years since its inception.

In 2010, ads were placed online and in the regional magazine *Texas Monthly*, and stake and hang tags were made available on request to growers and retailers. In 2011, point-of-purchase materials were made available to retailers in addition to stakes and hang tags. Television and radio ads are aired statewide in English and Spanish.

Needless to say, there is continual work to be done to raise consumer awareness of the program - but the brand is well accepted by those who are aware of it. The Texas Superstar[®] program started with partnerships and the future of the program is dependent on the continuing growth and strength of these partnerships.