

## Grafting and Marketing Specialty Nursery Crops<sup>®</sup>

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When I was asked by Dick Bir to give a presentation to this group on the subject of “Grafting and Marketing Specialty Nursery Crops” I expressed reservations about discussing marketing to a propagation group. The focus, at least as I understand it, is that the International Plant Propagation Society was created solely to “seek and share” knowledge about just that — plant propagation. However, I find with my small nursery, that marketing and propagation are inextricable and that to separate them is difficult.

As a propagator of woody ornamentals, I have chosen to use my grafting skills to market my small, but growing company. Grafting woody plants is something not everyone can do. I use this skill to my advantage. It helps me create a marketing plan that helps my company sell plants, which we all must do to maintain, and hopefully thrive in our business. This skill is a marketing tool in the sense that it differentiates you from your competition. You are perceived to have more interesting, less common plants that cannot be obtained just anywhere.

A substantial portion of the market is looking for unusual, different plants. And for the smaller grower, this portion of the market can be a profitable niche.

First, we must ask ourselves: ‘What is a specialty crop? Most importantly, we must understand that the answer would depend on who we asked. It means different things to different people.

A specialty crop is what **your** customer perceives as unusual or special; not what you or the market in general defines as special. One man’s treasure is another’s junk. And also keep in mind that as wholesale growers, we come across new plants long before the end consumer. Just as a plant first reaches the end market, growers may have known about it for years or even decades. Are we overlooking potential plants and sales simply because a plant is old to us? What may be common in our realm of plants, may still be difficult to find in the final marketplace.

We must also bear in mind that specialty does not necessarily mean rare. Rare plants may be the quest of the avid plant collector, but I would suggest that as commercial growers, we are also business people, and we must have a ready, reasonable market for our products. Specialty crops could be uncommon forms of common plants—pendulous selections, variegated or dwarf selections, different flowers, or perhaps an unusual leaf shape or color. *Cornus florida*, for example, has been a staple of Southeastern nurseries for many years, but how often does one find *C. florida* f. *pluribracteata* (syn. ‘Pluribracteata’), a double-flowering form, or *C. florida* ‘Pendula’ in the local garden center? No, these are not mainstream, high volume plants, but they have their place in commerce. And in my nursery, they have allowed my small nursery to get a foothold in a competitive market.

There are many potential benefits of growing and offering specialty crops to the trade. Among these to consider are:

## **THE ABILITY OF SPECIALTY CROPS TO DIFFERENTIATE YOUR BUSINESS FROM YOUR COMPETITORS**

If you are growing the same crops as your neighbor, then the customer looks to quality, service and price as any comparative shopper would. If however, you offer something different, the comparison isn't so easy. Your customer looks instead to the perceived value of the plant. Supply and demand takes on a new meaning here. The supply is relatively limited, and you as the business person must help create the demand. Herein lies an opportunity as well as a challenge. You may be in a position to get a premium price for your product and sell out at the same time. You may also have a greater margin to work with.

## **THE SPECIAL PLANT AS A MARKETING TOOL**

Use unusual plants to get customers to your door. They may come in for "something different," but once they are at your nursery, the opportunity to sell increases dramatically. Specialty plants can be instrumental in selling other plants you offer, and perhaps some of the more profitable ones.

## **THE WORD-OF-MOUTH EXPOSURE THAT UNUSUAL OFFERINGS PROVIDE**

Customers will seek you out for different taxa. Additionally, in my nursery some of my most unique plants have been brought to my attention by these customers. The customer in this case becomes an integral part of my research and development.

## **THE ABILITY TO OFFER YOUR GRAFTING SKILLS AS A VALUE-ADDED SERVICE TO YOUR CUSTOMER**

In my nursery, for example, I was able to offer custom-propagation to both the Biltmore Estate (*Aesculus pavia* 'Biltmore') and Hefner's Nursery (*Acer palmatum* 'Hefner's Select'). This allows my customer to get plants they want or need, while opening the door for me to sell other plants to them. This service is very valuable to them.

## **THE ABILITY AND OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE YOUR BUSINESS FUN**

Offering new and unusual plants means an ever-changing inventory of plant selections. Some will disappear, but there is always something new around the corner. This also keeps your business new and interesting to the customer, as they wonder what you will have next time they come back. And we all know that it is easier to keep an existing customer than it is to find a new one.

Of course, keeping your customer coming back is an essential goal in any business. For the specialty nursery, this is also a primary challenge.

## **YOU MUST FIND "NEW" PLANTS CONTINUOUSLY TO KEEP CUSTOMERS COMING BACK**

You have less time to react to the market than the larger grower of more common items. Your "new" plant may be an older, under-utilized selection; or more often than

not, a new selection altogether. My research and development entails visiting many gardens, arboreta, nurseries both wholesale and retail, and equally important, networking with other nurserymen and related plant people. They are a wealth of knowledge and resources. This can be costly and time consuming. But it can also be great fun and adventure. Plant people speak a common language, and friends can be found anywhere in the world. I have found that my customers are one of the best source of new plant material. They travel and seek new plants as well; and often bring them to my attention.

### **AS A GROWER OFFERING SPECIALTY CROPS, I FIND THAT MY ORDERS FROM CUSTOMERS ARE GENERALLY SMALL**

Customers will not buy large quantities of an unusual plant that has a smaller, limited retail market. The challenge is to offer something different, and by definition won't be purchased in large lots. One must be willing to offer a few of this and one or two of that. Even though I offer nearly 150 different cultivars of *Acer palmatum*, most are sold in twos and threes; and only a few selections are sold in large quantities. The result is I also need more customers for a given number of plants.

### **MY CUSTOMERS ALSO NEED, AND EXPECT, MORE INFORMATION TO ASSIST THEM IN SELLING MY PLANTS TO THEIR CUSTOMERS**

The end consumer wants specialty plants, but they also need information before they make a purchase. I offer my customers brief descriptions in my catalog, and more detailed information in a notebook which lists every plant we grow. Included are growth habit, flower and leaf color, ultimate height, and basic cultural information. Other items of interest with propagation or plant origin may included. I also offer plant tags which include this information. This service is especially important if prices are higher than comparably sized plants. Higher prices also necessitate quality.

I must also impart my enthusiasm and passion for plants to my customers. They must be excited and motivated to sell my plants in order for both of us to be successful. I cannot simply deliver unusual plants, and leave my customers with no marketing support. The more I help my customer, the more they can sell, and the more they will buy from me. This is a partnership in which we depend on each other.

### **IF YOU INTEND TO OFFER GRAFTED PLANTS AS PART OF YOUR SPECIALTY CROPS, CONSIDER THE CHALLENGES OF HAVING ADEQUATE ROOTSTOCK AVAILABLE**

Do you have the correct rootstock for a new plant? Is there enough (or too much) on hand or readily available when you need it? Often I do not know when I will come across something I wish to try, and I find it difficult to always be prepared.

Is it the optimal size and condition needed? How will you put this new plant into production? Many require several seasons before market. How will you estimate the number you will produce next year, before the first plant is sold? This takes planning and a financial investment on the front end, and the result is an unknown.

## ALONG WITH THIS TYPE OF BUSINESS COMES THE INVENTORY MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH GROWING MANY DIFFERENT CROPS

It is not common to have multiple crops, and small quantities of most of them. This is challenging both to the business operator, as well as his/her staff.

## AND LAST OF ALL, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO FAIL

Every crop will not be successful and/or profitable. You must be willing to accept that some plants will not sell very well, others will prove to be too difficult to propagate on a commercially viable or economical scale. Even more frustrating is the times when the demand is there, but rootstock, scionwood, or cuttings aren't readily available in sufficient quantity or quality. I have found this to be especially difficult. I have had a plant ready to sell in small quantities, only to sell out, and not be able to offer it the following season. Customers may be patient to a point, but they don't understand the problems associated with offering an unproven, or perhaps unknown plant. I have at times been too cautious with producing enough plants; only to find the demand is great, but I cannot supply what my customers want. And just as often, I produce plants and have them in the nursery, but the demand isn't what I had hoped or anticipated.

To illustrate these points, I offer the following plants that I grow at my nursery as examples of specialty crops. Some of these are certainly known in nurseries, gardens, and arboreta. But we must remember, the end consumer isn't always aware these plants exist in the trade. As you look over this brief list, you will be looking for something new and different to *you*; and this is how your customer looks through a specialty nursery catalog or a garden center.

***Acer palmatum* 'Hefner's Red'**. This is an example of a plant I learned about from a customer, Randy Hefner, at Hefner's Nursery. He asked me to graft his selection, so that he could grow it on it at his nursery.

***Aesculus pavia* 'Biltmore'**. This is a selection that caught my attention several years ago. I began grafting it for the Biltmore Estate nursery, and then for my customers. The name alone sells this plant. It essentially markets itself through name recognition.

***Acer palmatum* 'Ukigumo'**. I only sell a few of these each year, but customers will order a few because it is different. They then add a few dozen or so of the common maples to "fill out the order". This is an example of a specialty item helping sell other items.

***Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Amazing Grace', *Cercis canadensis* var. *texensis* 'Traveller', *Cornus kousa* 'Elizabeth Lustgarten', and *Ulmus alata* 'Lace Parasol'**. These plants are examples of different forms of common plants. In this case pendulous forms. They are unique forms, but the species is known to most gardeners. They are familiar enough with the common forms to grow it, but will purchase these cultivars because they are unique.

***Ginkgo biloba* 'Chase Manhattan' and *G. biloba* 'Tubiformis'**. These plants are cultivars of the well-known ginkgo, but offer a dwarf form and one with unusual foliage.

***Cornus kousa* ‘Goldfinch’.** Because we grow seedlings to serve as rootstocks, I occasionally come across something unique. In this case, a variegated form of *C. kousa*. If it proves to be better than other similar cultivars already in the trade, I will bud this form and offer it in the future.

***Chionanthus virginicus* ‘Emerald Knight’.** This is a selection I made from seedlings at the nursery. It offers dark, shiny foliage on a heavy flowering male form. It must be grafted, but grows quickly. I am already seeing demand for this plant. This serves as an example of offering a plant that no one else has.

The specialty nursery offering grafted plants must always have some idea of the plants it will offer in the future. Rootstock must be obtained prior to the propagation of new plants by grafting. This requires considerable planning and research to get the best results. Which rootstock is best? When is the best time to graft this species? What is the best method to graft — chip bud, T-bud, winter bench graft, or summer graft? How will the rootstock be prepared and what will be the aftercare of that grafted plant? How much budwood will be available and when? Will it be a profitable plant, or simply a “loss leader”? One must be willing and able to invest time, money, and effort in an unknown entity. Given this, one must also be willing, at times, to fail.

In conclusion, I offer the following suggestions. Allow your grafting and propagation skills to work for the marketing department of your business, as well as the production department. If you have a special skill, such as grafting, that other nurserymen don’t have or don’t utilize, use it to your benefit. Learning to graft well takes time. Think of this as an investment in your business. The yield of the art of grafting is not just producing plants, but it is also from the ability to use it as marketing tool.

Consider offering the unusual, different, or difficult-to-grow plants. They may or may not be profitable; but they will help sell the other plants that you offer. In addition, this will keep your customer’s interest in your business this season, and in the years to follow. And more importantly, it will keep your interest and passion alive as well. Your passion for what you do will show, and above all else, this will sell your plants.