

Propagation and Promotion at Bransford Garden Plants®

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade has proved to be one of considerable change for Bransford, both in the company's structure and within our product range, which now consists of an ever-increasing number of promotional plants. This transition began in the early 1990s with the introduction of *Hebe* 'Rosie' and *Hebe* 'Mohawk', Purple Pixie® hebe (syn. *Hebe* 'Purple Pixie') which with their distinctive coloured pots and eye-catching point-of-sale material, proved to be hugely successful. Their popularity is reflected in the fact that they still remain among the best sellers within the promotional calendar. In subsequent years the company has seen a rise in the number of heavily promoted lines within the range and, in particular, the introduction of new plants with their own specific promotional programmes.

These changes have posed plenty of challenges for the business and not least for propagation staff. Trialling new plants and producing sufficient liners for a promotional run have been two of the main challenges faced. We have identified key areas, which, in order for the whole process to work, must be satisfied. These are: a well structured trialling process; good communication with sales and production departments; building strong relationships with the innovative growers and breeders who create new product lines.

This paper focuses on the areas in which propagators have influence. The author acknowledges there are many other aspects to the introduction and promotion of new plants, for example the importance of trialling agreements.

THE TRIALLING PROCESS

Our early trialling programmes were unsophisticated. Specimens of potential new product lines were housed in any available space and then invariably they were forgotten about and neglected. The first improvement made was to construct a polytunnel in the stock plant beds, which meant all trial plants could be kept in the same environment. It also gave propagation staff increased feelings of responsibility for the trials. However, the location of the stock beds, some distance away from the main propagation unit, meant propagation staff were unable to spend enough time evaluating the trial plants.

About 2 years ago the trial plantings were relocated to a tunnel adjacent to the main propagation work area, enabling staff to give them the appropriate amount of attention. In addition a computer file was set up, which allows accurate records of all trial plants to be kept.

We now have a more organised trialling process but there is still room for improvement. We are due to relocate the entire propagation unit by the end of 2004 and part of the development will include a new protected environment, together with outside standing and planting beds. This will provide a new facility to give trial plants a true test of their suitability as future promotional lines.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Good communication is imperative if the trialling and development of new promotional plants is to be successful. At all stages, sales, production, and propagation staff needs to work together, with the main benefits being:

- The whole process from identifying a potential new plant, through trialling, to production and marketing can be undertaken smoothly and in the shortest possible time.
- Space and resources can be planned ahead so they are available at the right time for maximum efficiency.
- The likelihood of confusion or unreliable targets, which may result in disappointed customers, is reduced.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH GROWERS AND BREEDERS

Without innovative growers and breeders we would have no new plants to trial. Building relationships with them and involving them throughout the trialling and marketing process provides two particularly important benefits:

- 1) A wholesale nursery that is trusted by breeders and innovative growers is more likely to be offered the opportunity to work with the new plants they raise in the future. A positive reputation among the breeding and growing community is likely to increase the number of suppliers interested in offering potential new plants.
- 2) In most cases the breeders and growers are true experts in their field. By tapping into this knowledge the wholesale nursery is more likely to be successful propagating and growing the plants in question.

Part of the relationship building has been to invite the breeders and growers to Bransford Garden Plants to see how it operates and to reciprocate this with Bransford staff visiting the suppliers' nurseries. This helps lead to a healthy supply of new plants and to greater benefits for all involved.