

## Vendor-Assisted Marketing for Perennial Growers<sup>®</sup>

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Marketing a product or product line is not a new concept for most non-plant-oriented businesses. Almost everything we touch in our daily lives has some form of marketing slant. Whether its is the hamburger we buy at a fast food chain or beer we buy in the store there is some form of marketing to help entice the consumer to buy the product. For some reason our industry has been be slow to embrace the marketing concept. To some it is a demeaning or even desperate way to sell their plants. Many in our industry still have the "Quality Always Sells" mentality. Twenty-five or 30 years ago when there was less selection available, fewer nurseries were growing fewer plants than today, which created more of as sellers market. Today there are many factors at play that demand better information and service to sell plant material. First and foremost, there are lots of great nurseries growing high quality plant material. Therefore you could have the best plants on the planet but without a good marketing strategy many of these plants could be destined for the compost pile. Secondly, with all of the new plants being brought to market these days it is vitally important that nurseries keep up with superior varieties that might be better than older ones. This requires research, testing, and providing information to the consumer so that the merits of these new plants can be passed along. Finally, there is the consumer who, unlike 25 and 30 years ago, is becoming better educated on plants to the point where they may know more about the plants being sold than the garden center employee who is out there assisting them. This is because of the numerous magazine publications dedicated to horticulture as well as television exposure with celebrities such as P. Allen Smith to radio talk shows that dedicate time every week to horticulture and information for the listening consumer. It is naive to think that marketing is a desperate way to sell our product. It is time for the nursery industry to take on this very effective way to sell their product line in the most dynamic and effective way possible and at the same time educate an ever-demanding consumer who is looking for both value and quality. This is Prides Corner Farms story of our evolution in marketing.

It is difficult to discuss just perennials at Prides Corner Farm as our marketing is geared to sell both woody and perennials plants under a very diversified marketing strategy. In 1994 for instance, our marketing strategy consisted of one color pot (black) that we used to pot all of our plants into. Today, 10 years later we have 16 branded programs encompassing woody ornamentals and herbaceous perennials, as well as 17 different color containers to accentuate and market the plants they are potted into. The container color is the first key piece of evidence that we, along with other nurseries market plants. The value behind different colors is that it first, makes a statement that says, "Come on over here and look at me. I'm different." It is also a visual piece of information that might tell you what kind of plant it is such as flower color or foliage. Once the consumer is drawn to these plants other marketing factors at work take over. Let me talk about some of our branded programs to help all of you get an idea about how these programs work for us.

Marketing isn't always about making money. As with our "Sara's Superb Herbs" program it is as much about fostering good will and giving something back to the community. The brainchild of Tim Kane, our sales and marketing manager, Prides Corner saw a need for larger 1-gallon, finished herbs to complement our product

line. People can buy a larger herb plant and get the satisfaction of knowing that \$.50 from each purchased plant is donated to Easter Seals and Camp Hemlocks to help disabled children and adults enjoy the outdoors. Since its inception in 2001 Prides Corner Farms has donated nearly \$120,000.00 to this very worthy cause.

Tragedy and sacrifice touch nearly everyone's friends or families during ones lifetime. Our "Pink Ribbon" program, similar to Sara's superb herbs, functions in a way that gives back to the community something that will make the customers who buy our plants something to feel good about when they buy into this marketing program. Prides Corner pledges 10% of this programs proceeds to breast cancer research and since its inception in 2003 have donated close to \$20,000.00 to finding a cure for this disease. Plants such as *Rhododendron* 'Rosy Miracles', *Rosa* 'Pink and Proud', as well as *Dicentra* 'King of Hearts' are highlighted in this program.

For all of the marketing programs that Prides Corner Farms promotes we offer at cost wooden displays to help display the plants in these programs. For the Pink Ribbon program we also sell Pink Ribbon posters at cost and with the Sarah's Superb Herbs program, with a minimum purchase we offer posters and our 16-page booklet at no cost.

Blooms of Bressingham is one of the nationally recognized programs we promote. This is a group of cutting-edge plants promoted in a way to get as much marketing exposure as possible. All of these plants grown by Prides are potted in a distinctive terra cotta container with a colorful Bloom picture tag. The plants are marketed nationally as well as regional retail publications such as "People, Places, and Plants."

Yet another national marketing program the All American Daylilies consist of *Hemerocallis* chosen from thousands of plants tested throughout the United States in various climatic zones. The result of this testing are a group of daylilies that we feel perform "above and beyond" and provide spectacular color. These plants are grown in distinctive Blue containers that include a poster and handout with a minimum purchase.

One of the challenges of our customers and a concern of Prides Corner is the ability to display and maintain all of these programs in a way that they are presenting themselves in the best possible way. As a service to our customers who embrace these programs Prides Corner employs a person who is knowledgeable in all of these programs to come into their stores to assist in setting up and maintaining these displays. Because this person is a true plantsman he has the ability to genuinely help out these customers and offer good advice to help display and promote these plants and programs properly.

"Jeepers Creepers" is relatively new to Prides Corner but it has been met with a tremendous response. This exclusive branded program has exploded for us and the reason is because of the way they are promoted and the way the plants are displayed. Unlike our container-grown plants these plants are sold by the flat with point-of-purchase material offered for a minimum order of 60 flats or more.

The next two programs, "My Favorite Mums", and "Volcano Phlox" are two new programs we are promoting for the first time this year. Both programs take advantage of very distinctive color containers to separate them from other plants in their genus and both programs come with point of purchase poster and handout information at no cost when a minimum order is placed.

Flower Carpet roses are probably one of the best-known programs in the country. We are fortunate to be able to grow these plants. As with all Tesslar programs, they are heavily advertised throughout the country. The popularity of the program can-

not be underestimated and we provide a flower carpet poster with a minimum order. Because of the way they are used in the landscape most purchases of these plants are usually in multiple quantities hence the reason that so many are grown.

“Astilbe Color Flash” is a new program that promotes a single plant. This plant is very vigorous with multi-colored foliage. Next year there will be a new astilbe to accompany this plant that has gold foliage.

“Endless Summer” again is a national program promoted by Bailey’s nursery that focuses on the merits of one specific plant, which is a *Hydrangea macrophylla* that has re-blooming characteristics. In the colder climates of the Northeast and Midwest this can be quite a unique trait as with many macrophylla’s most flowers are set on the previous years wood. In the northern tier of the United States of America many of these plants die back nearly to the ground which means poor flower output during the summer. With “Endless Summer” the flowers are recurring which means hydrangeas that can be enjoyed even in the more severe areas of our nation. For this program we offer two levels of promotion that offer a small post and stand or a banner depending on the size of the order.

Another in-house marketing promotion is a program we call “The New American Garden”. We select a plant based on three criteria, Zone 5 hardiness, interesting but underused in the landscape, and relatively low maintenance. There are a number of plants offered through the season to promote a new and different plant to keep the program fresh.

Prides Corner Farms has always appreciated the creativity and success of the “Proven Winners” line of mostly herbaceous plants that come mostly from greenhouse operations. Now Color Choice has joined Proven Winners to promote their cutting-edge woody line of plant material to help round out their line of plant material. With Proven Winners marketing power and the recognition of exciting Color Choice plants it was easy to see how this marketing program can only be a huge success. Along with the distinctive Proven Winners Logo the plants are grown in a white container with the Proven winners logo in black lettering.

The final program is as much a concept as a program. It solves the age-old questions associated with plant purchases. How or where can the plants I buy be best used? We call this “The Solution Series”. Currently there are six solution series offered at Prides Corner Farms. Fragrance Gardening, Shade Gardening, Bird Gardening, Butterfly Gardening, Summer Color Gardening, and Autumn Beauty Gardening. Unlike many of the other promotions we promote groups of plants that best utilize these six gardening choices. Point-of-purchase material includes a picket fence, poster, and handouts. This marketing concept has been very well received and we have received reports from some of our customers that their consumers will come in and buy the entire display because it offers the consumer a solution to a problem they might have in their yard.

Every nursery wants to be recognized as the place that produces the best quality plants for the consumer. But in these changing times you need to offer more than just a plant. Marketing is as much helping to educate an ever-demanding consumer so that he or she can make the right purchase. You want these people coming back. So just having great plants is not enough if you do not know how to market and sell them in an ever-competitive industry. We at Prides Corner Farms recognize the importance of keeping up with new and exciting cultivars and promoting, so that they can reach as many of our customers as possible.