

## Experiences in Researching and Developing New Nursery Stock Crops for Both Small and Large Nurseries<sup>©</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

The author runs Green's Leaves, a small business producing specialist plants selling to landscapers and to the general public at plant fairs, and works part-time in the new plants R&D department of Wyevale Nurseries, a large wholesale nursery stock business.

As a supplier of garden centre stock, Wyevale Nurseries is constantly being asked about new plants being offered in the latest catalogue, whether new to cultivation, new to the nursery, or new to production in commercial numbers.

The Royal Horticulture Society *Plant Finder* lists more than 70,000 plants available from nurseries in the U.K., which just shows what a comparatively small number of lines the average individual nursery can offer. While customers have been conditioned to expect new plants (by promotion material from nurseries, constant release of new varieties, and greater media interest), there needs to be a strict process to ensure only worthwhile plants are added to a nursery's list.

At Wyevale Container Plants the following process has been developed to ensure only those new plants appropriate to the market are released.

### SOURCING

New plants can be obtained from quality wholesale suppliers of liners, plugs, and bare-root material. Wyevale's facilities and skills and its reputation in the market means it is offered a good supply of new lines from both U.K. and overseas plant raisers.

Good new plants can also be discovered at plant fairs, specialist nurseries, and specialist retail plant centres. Green's Leaves exhibits at fairs across the U.K., and it is possible to find plenty of good plants, currently grown only in small quantities, available at these. However, only a small number will be taken up by large growers for the mass market since most of these plants are too subtle or only likely to appeal to connoisseurs.

Sports are also a source of new varieties, of course, although only a small proportion will prove suitable for the market.

### TRIALS

It's important to check container performance for the grower as well as garden performance for the consumer. Trials also provide the opportunity to obtain good quality images since it is important to show the plant at its best in the review process, as well as to produce point-of-sale material for those species and varieties that do get taken forward. While plants have to be pretty tough, they do need to be given a reasonable chance, and it is important that the nursery trials site is well maintained with good vigilance on pest and disease monitoring, appropriate watering, and so on.

## REVIEW

At Wyevale, the decision whether or not to develop a plant is made after inputs from both growers and the sales team at regular New Plant Review Meetings. Personal taste and instinct have to be balanced against specific criteria including:

- Ease of propagation and production.
- Stability and uniformity in production.
- Not prone to pest and disease problems.
- Maintains good appearance over relatively long periods.
- Offers significant differences or advantages over existing related species and selections already on the market.
- Fits with current planting fashions.
- Suitability for large-scale promotion.
- Available with some exclusivity.
- Likely to be long-term addition to the range.
- Likely to sell to several types of customer.
- Has a “wow” factor.
- Not subject to excessively high royalties.

Obviously, few plants are totally straightforward, and none will meet all of these criteria. Plants that have only some of these characteristics may only be suitable for smaller grower-retailers, not for mass-market wholesale nurseries.

Too many potential pitfalls mean a plant will be rejected, and if the sales team can't get excited, it is probably not worth bothering to grow the plant. In some cases plants may need to be test-marketed, for example through a local garden centre, to provide a more accurate idea of a plant's potential.

## PLANNING PRODUCTION AND MARKETING

Once a plant gets approved in principle, the following points need to be clarified.

**Promotional Line or Catalogue Plant?** For promotional lines, design of picture labels and point of sale boards needs to begin in tandem with production planning. Even for new plants that will simply be added to the catalogue, labels will need to be developed since they are unlikely to be available off-shelf.

**Target Markets.** Ideally you need to be able to identify more than one target market to avoid risking having all your eggs in one basket.

**Numbers and Pot Sizes.** It may be tempting to go high if you are keen and confident, but it may be better to develop sales organically — it may be harder than you anticipate to persuade customers in the first year — and build up volumes over several years.

**Propagate In-House or Buy In?** Knowing the relative strengths and specialities of your suppliers is important. A weakness of propagating in-house is that it can take several years to bulk up a new line, so it may be easier, quicker, and even cheaper to contract to a specialist propagator or micropropagator.

Product R&D is not an exact science. The plants offered by any nursery depend on the nursery's strengths and weaknesses, customer perceptions of the nursery, and market trends. But a nursery cannot afford to stop looking to improve its range.

## LITERATURE CITED

**Royal Horticulture Society Plantfinder.** 2006-2007. T. Lord (Ed.), Royal Hort. Soc. Publ./Dorling Kindersly, London.