

Propagation to Popularization: Moving New Plants into the Mainstream[®]

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Over the past two decades the urban landscapes of Phoenix and other key cities in the Southwest have undergone a major transformation. Lush, high-water-use plants and turf are almost a thing of the past on commercial and municipal projects, and are much less prevalent in residential communities. The current plant palette consists of desert-adapted and water-efficient plants that were unknown in the marketplace 20 years ago. How have these new plants achieved popularity? How did they move from a propagation bench into right-of-way landscapes, public spaces, and private gardens? Professionals working together have fostered a greater appreciation and acceptance of desert plants in our region. Education has been the key to change. Botanical gardens, universities and community colleges, municipal water conservation programs, enthusiastic garden writers, horticulturists, landscape architects and designers, and many others have engineered the transformation. The combined efforts of these many individuals have resulted in a unique plant palette that provides a distinct sense of place and conserves resources.

As a grower that specializes in testing and introducing desert-adapted plant material, Mountain States Wholesale Nursery has played a key role in the development and marketing of new plant material. For 40 years Ron Gass' vision has been to introduce, provide, and popularize desert-adapted plants for the Southwest. Mountain States has introduced over 200 ornamental plants which are now staples in arid landscapes. This employee-owned company currently employs 90 people at three Arizona growing grounds encompassing 600 acres. Roughly 2 million plants per year are shipped to customers and projects in California, Arizona, Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas.

Moving new plants into the mainstream takes patience, a willingness to invest resources, and long-term vision. The entire process revolves around education. Every new plant first goes through internal testing, for ease of propagation and growth in containers, then to determine its growth habit and characteristics in test gardens. A few are selected for release. Large quantities of trial plants are then distributed free of charge to botanical gardens, college and university campuses, and landscape professionals and horticulturists for trialing and feedback. The responses we receive at this point are invaluable, and determine the potential popularity and production levels of new material. If a plant is highly successful, these professionals become ambassadors for the plant, and encourage their clients and others to add it to their palettes. Landscape architects and designers are especially effective in influencing large-scale acceptance and use of a new product. Popular plants are soon visible in large-scale commercial landscapes, and the general public begins to request them in retail garden centers.

While most of our educational resources are aimed at landscape professionals, who then educate the public, we do participate in some public education as well. Our sales team conducts product knowledge seminars at retail garden centers, both to educate the staff and the public about the beauty and care of new plant material.

We often have the opportunity to speak at home and garden shows, master gardener conferences, and garden club meetings. Garden writers play a pivotal role in educating the public about new plants, so we make it a priority to cultivate strong relationships with these individuals, and provide information and photographs for them on a regular basis. Our philosophy is that a great plant will speak for itself. Our role is to make it available to as many professionals as is practical in order to maximize its exposure in the marketplace. Educate and donate, and the exceptional new plants will soon become part of the mainstream.