

Plant Trials and Evaluations: Communicating Results to Consumers[©]

Allen Owings

Louisiana State University, AgCenter Hammond Research Station, 21549 Old Covington Hwy, Hammond, Louisiana 70403, USA

Email: aowings@agcenter.lsu.edu

INTRODUCTION

Home gardening consumers want new and improved ornamental plants for their landscape. One of the focus areas for ornamental horticulture over the years has been the development of new plant cultivars. New plants spark interest among retailers, landscapers, and especially consumers and provide diversity in the landscape. One of the challenges of trial gardens, plant companies introducing plants, retailers, nursery growers, and others, is developing innovative ways of providing a way to effectively communicate results showing “real world” production and landscape performance of these new cultivars to their customers and the gardening public.

UNIVERSITY TRIAL GARDEN PROGRAMS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

The geographical area of the Southern Region — International Plant Propagator’s Society has a number of land grant universities conducting trial evaluations of new plant cultivars. At the same time, many also undertake the tasks of evaluation already existing genera, species, and cultivars. Typically, the evaluation of new herbaceous plants is ahead of the evaluation of new woody ornamental plants.

Test gardens in the southeastern United States include Texas A&M University in Overton; Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas; three locations at the University of Arkansas; Louisiana State University (LSU), AgCenter’s Botanical Gardens at Burden in Baton Rouge and Hammond Research Station in Hammond; Mississippi State University efforts in Poplarville, Verona, Crystal Springs, and Starkville; University of Tennessee garden trials in Knoxville and Jackson; University of Georgia in Athens; University of Florida in Quincy; J.C. Raulston Arboretum at North Carolina State University in Raleigh; and more. Also, public gardens are now joining in plant trials and evaluations with the Dallas Arboretum being at the forefront of this effort.

LOUISIANA SUPER PLANT – PROMOTION AND MARKETING PROGRAM

Universities have plant promotion and marketing programs that attempt to provide plant trial results to the consumer horticulture audience. In addition, there are national programs, such as All-America Selections, that conduct similar efforts.

In Louisiana, the LSU AgCenter in cooperation with the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry re-initiated an ornamental plant marketing and promotion program in fall 2010. This new program is called Louisiana Super Plants. Funded has been provided from the Specialty Crop Competiveness State Block Grant. A previous program, called Louisiana Select, ran in Louisiana from 1996-2000.

The Louisiana Super Plants program has three parts. The first identifies outstanding plants. The second makes sure the plants are available at retail nurseries and garden centers. The third promotes the plants to Louisiana gardening consumer.

Each Super Plant must have at least two years of rigorous evaluations and have a proven track record under north and south Louisiana growing conditions. Louisiana Super Plants must prove hardy across the state. Louisiana Super Plants must be easily produced and available for all nursery and landscape industry wholesalers and retailers to market and sell.

Louisiana Super Plants are selected two years in advance of release. The Louisiana Super Plants selection committee composed of LSU AgCenter personnel selects plants based upon observations made in replicated plots and demonstration trials across the state.

The Louisiana Super Plants advisory committee, which is composed of nursery and

landscape industry personnel from across the state, meets with the plant selection committee for further scrutiny of the plant's landscape ability and marketability. This selection process gives each Super Plant the combined rating of university-tested and industry-approved.

To ensure that Louisiana Super Plant selections are available at retail nurseries and garden centers, the Louisiana Super Plants selection committee works closely with Louisiana wholesale growers so they produce plenty of the selected plants. At the same time, retail sellers are kept informed of the selections and are encouraged to carry them in their garden centers and nurseries. In addition, display signs containing plant photos and growing information are provided to nurseries and garden centers to help customers find and choose Louisiana Super Plants.

The first Louisiana Super Plants were promoted in the fall of 2010. Through 2013, twenty-two plants have been identified as Louisiana Super Plants with an additional five selected for 2014 promotion. More than 200 retail and grower operations have signed up to participate in the program. Surveys of participants were conducted to determine the impact the Louisiana Super Plants program had on sales. In the first season (fall 2010) of Louisiana Super Plants, one wholesale grower reported a 145% increase in sales of Amazon dianthus over the previous year. A retail garden center had a 1,920 percent increase in Camelot foxglove sales. Sales of the woody ornamental Shishi Gashira camellia were up by 45% at one wholesale grower.

A larger survey was conducted during the summer of 2012 after four marketing seasons. Retail and wholesale businesses participating in the Louisiana Super Plants program were contacted by email, and 15% responded. Of the participants who responded, 40% described their business as retail, 40% as wholesale, none as landscape design, and 20% as landscape installation and maintenance. Eighty percent of the respondents said the program had a positive effect on their business. Fifty percent of the respondents said sales or use of Super Plants in their business increased from 21% to 40% after the promotion began; the other 50% indicated increased sales of 20% or less.

The survey indicated that not only did the program increase sales of Louisiana Super Plants, but overall sales at a business also increased. More than 60% said the Super Plants program increased traffic flow or interest in their business. All the respondents indicated that the program increased overall sales in their business from 10% to 60%. Eighty-five percent of the respondents said the Louisiana Super Plants program had been beneficial to the nursery and landscape industry.

When asked to name the Super Plant that had the greatest impact on sales, one respondent wrote "no one plant, but an increase in general plant knowledge and interest."

In other states, programs that are similar to the Louisiana Super Plant program include the Texas Superstar program coordinated at Texas A&M University and the Mississippi Medallion program co-sponsored by the Mississippi State University Cooperative Extension Service, Mississippi Department of Agriculture, and Forestry and Mississippi Nursery and Landscape Association. Other states such as Florida (Plants of the Year, now Florida Garden Select), Georgia (Gold Medal Plant Program), and Virginia (Beautiful Gardens) participate in program efforts to marketing, promote and/or introduce new plants to consumers.

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY AGCENTER MASS COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA EFFORTS

How are universities conducting more timely communication of research results and improving industry, consumer outreach? Communication efforts have been initiated by the LSU AgCenter via Facebook, electronic newsletter updates, and trial garden reports.

Faculty at the LSU AgCenter's Hammond Research Station initiated a Facebook social media page in May 2011. The page is updated 3-5 times weekly with ornamental plant of the week postings, interactive discussion questions and posts pertaining to research and extension programs at the station and elsewhere at the LSU AgCenter. Nine hundred twenty people currently like the page and monthly active users number approximately

500. The page results in 2,000-3,000 contacts weekly. A separate Facebook page created by LSU AgCenter communications faculty in April 2010 for the LSU AgCenter has 5,800 friends (likes) with 500-1000 monthly active users and 5,000-7,500 contacts weekly.

The LSU AgCenter Hammond Research Station's ornamental horticulture electronic e-mail newsletter was initiated in July 2007 and distributes information weekly to 950 recipients through June 2013. The current format is twice monthly. Updates are formatted as PDFs. The e-news consist of 8-10 pages with 3-4 photos, weekly ornamental plant of the week, event calendars, links to landscape horticulture news articles and 2-3 ornamental horticulture timely topics.

The LSU AgCenter trial garden report from the Hammond Research Station is sent twice monthly via e-mail to 950 recipients. This media communication was initiated in Sept. 2011. Issues are formatted as one-page, three-columned, letter size PDFs and dated the first and fifteenth of each month. Two to three photos are included in each issue and along with 3-4 short plant trial related items. The original formatted page was 8.5 × 11 in. A new expanded format started recently (8.5×14 in.). The LSU AgCenter ornamental horticulture e-news updates and trial garden reports are archived on the Louisiana Nursery and Landscape Association website (www.lnla.org). These mass media efforts resulted in 436,000 primary clientele contacts in 2012.

NATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR PLANT PROMOTION

Several independent, non-profit groups are involved in plant promotions. These include All-America Selections, National Garden Bureau, Perennial Plant Association, Herb Society of America, and the American Garden Rose Selections.

The All-America Selections mission is “to promote new garden varieties with superior garden performance judged in impartial trials in North America.” The group desires to test new, unsold plants of flowers, bedding plants, and vegetables. Other goals are to inform gardens of AAS winners and to earn gardener's trust in AAS winners. A tagline is “tested nationally and proven locally”. There are almost 200 gardens in 55 locations across the country testing potential AAS winners. All-America Selections actively participates in the American Garden Award (AGA) program with the National Garden Bureau.

The National Garden Bureau (NGB) started in 1920. Their mission is “to improve the quality of life and the environment through increased use of seeds and plants”. Their purpose is “to educate, to inspire and motivate people, to increase their use of plants in homes, gardens, and workplaces by being the marketing arm of the gardening industry”. Efforts of the NGB include the previously mentioned AGA program, “year of the” annually for an edible, annual and perennial, and new variety announcement listings each year.

Roses have been traditionally been promoted to gardening consumer via the All-America Rose Selections (AARS) program. This program started in 1938 and was dedicated to the introduction and promotion of exceptional roses. Sadly, AARS is being dissolved. A new program for evaluating and promoting roses has launched and is called the American Garden Rose Selections (AGRS). Twelve gardens initiated trials in 2013 with the first AGRS winner(s) being announced in 2017. Regional winners will be named in this program in addition to fragrant roses. A program motto is “bringing you great roses you can grow where you live”.

The Perennial Plant Association has a plant program called “Perennial Plant of the Year” and the Herb Society of America has a program called “Herb of the Year”. The All-America Daylily program has named 20 winning cultivars in previous years. Another program is the “Rhododendron of the Year” from the American Rhododendron Society.

A new initiative with potential is the National Plant Trials Database (NPTD). This program started in 2011 and is an on-line resource to serve as a central repository for trial data of the plants from the breeders who choose to participate. The trials grounds that choose to participate agree to adopt a standardized trialing protocol and a minimum set of standardized scoring procedures. At the end of the trialing season, each trial manager

updates this database with their scores and other trial data. Currently, only participating companies and cooperators have access to the data but this may be a public way to disseminate trial garden data in the future. There are 10 breeding company supporting sponsors thus far with 30 trial gardens participating.

And, another new program launched over the past 2 years is the Plant Something campaign. So far, there are 11 states with Arkansas, Virginia, and North Carolina in the IPPS-Southern Region area participating. The program has a commercial that “imagines live without plants” and also promotes the “perks of plants”. The group also promotes “growth investments” (boost resale value of home with landscaping), “shady deal” (reduction of energy consumption using plants and trees), local color (neighborhood satisfaction is tied to landscaping) and greener is cleaner (trees removing carbon dioxide).

USEFUL WEBSITES FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Louisiana Super Plants - <www.lsuagcenter.com/superplants>
- Texas Superstars - <www.texassuperstar.com>
- All-America Selections - <www.all-americaselections.org>
- American Garden Rose Selections - <www.americangardenroseselections.com>
- National Garden Bureau - <www.ngb.org>
- National Plant Trials Database - <www.planttrials.org>
- Plant Something - <www.plant-something.org>