

Alternative Crops for Christmas Sale

Richard J. McAvoy

*Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist
Greenhouse Crops.*

There's no doubt about it. The Christmas sales season in the floriculture industry is dominated by the poinsettia, but after a below-average season in the northeast last year, I wonder how many growers are considering other crop production and marketing options.

Some growers may recall a recent article in *GrowerTalks* by Roy Larson (The Larson Report, March 1991) entitled "Too Many Poinsettias?" In this article Roy Larson contemplated the dominant stature of the poinsettia in the Christmas market and the relatively meager market share held by alternative crops and the rather limited variety of alternative crops offered to consumers by the industry.

In talking with growers and planning educational programs for growers, there seems to be an interest in alternative crops for Christmas (as well as for other seasons). Indeed Larson cites a number of examples, both past (1940s!) and present, of industry experts advising growers to increase the variety they offer customers.

Are there other crops growers can consider for the Christmas holiday market? Yes, there are alternatives! Many are traditional, but there are some new ideas. Among the traditional crops, consider cyclamen, pot mums, begonias, azaleas, african violets and kalanchoes. Some growers in Connecticut already grow limited amounts of this material for Christmas sale.

What about less traditional material? White Flower Farm produces and markets baskets of Jasmine, small topiary pots of Rosemarie and Phalanopsis orchids for the winter holiday season. These are not your standard fare, but they do well for them. *They have a market niche.*

At a recent meeting of a regional cooperative research project on *Alternative Production Technologies of Alstroemeria and Other Alternative Floriculture Crops*, Charles Williams (New Hampshire) talked about producing potted annuals (4-, 5- and 6-inch) such as red salvia for Christmas. I think this is a good idea. How about New Guinea Impatiens (certainly the colors are there). If area growers can produce red and marbled poinsettias for Easter (see P. Konjoian's article, *Greenhouse Manager*, April 1991), why not holiday-colored annuals for Christmas?

Poinsettias are king, I don't see that changing soon. However, I also believe that there is room for innovation on the part of plant producers. By taking the risk to put new ideas into practice, you may find a marketing niche with alternative holiday crops.

