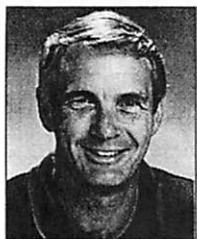


# IS THERE A MARKET FOR . . . ?

by Allan Armitage, University of Georgia



My colleague, Dr. Michael Dirr, is always talking about new woody plants for the nursery trade. He describes similar plant attributes that I talk about when I discuss herbaceous plants, features such as functionality, flowering, and foliage. However, he often adds an element we seldom feel is important, that is, the presence of ornamental fruit. He waxes poetically about the winged fruit of Japanese maples, the red berries of deciduous hollies

or the long lasting fruit of Viburnums. Growers, retailers, landscapers and consumers purchase many woody plants because of the ornamental fruit, an important plus in sales of those plants. However, in the herbaceous side of life, we seldom mention fruit at all. We are so flower conscious that the rest of the plant is seldom mentioned, especially the fruit. Last month in my column in Greenhouse Grower Magazine, I asked "Is there a market for fall flowering annuals", today I ask a similar question, "Is there a market for plants with ornamental fruit?", that is, can ornamental fruit enhance sales of certain plants. Here are three, try them on for size.

**Golden Dewdrops**, proper name *Duranta erecta*. Grown for the terrific lavender-blue flowers (it belongs to the Verbenaceae family), which occur in spring the greenhouse, or early summer in the landscape. If grown as an annual, flowering begins earlier than if perennialized (zone 7).

Propagated from cuttings, grown-on in 4" pots to gallons. Plants become woody at the base and grow 2-3' tall in North, 3-4' in South. In late summer and fall, plant can become laden with golden fruit, which hangs from plant, attracting birds and people. A glowing architectural feature in the fall. No insects or diseases I am aware of, however, as plants age, the stems become thorny, not like a rose, but more like barberry.

More of a problem where plants perennialize. A thornless form is presently being developed. Other forms include 'Alba', with white flowers but with considerably less flower power, and 'Variegata', with beautiful foliage but no flowers.

**Lavender Popcorn**, proper name *Lantana trifolia*. Grown for handsome lavender flowers and upright habit, but nearly any other lantana I can think of has prettier flowers and a better habit than this one. This plant, however, is a Madison Avenue dream plant, because it is grown for no other reason than "fun", an almost alien concept in this age of greenhouse factories and serious gardeners.

Propagated by seed or cuttings, plants can be produced in 4" pot's. Placed in the landscape, they grow 1-3' tall and produce flowers most of the season, similar to other lantanas. Starting mid summer and peaking in the fall, the lavender fruit is formed on long "cobs" looking all the world like lavender popcorn.

Birds love it, kids think it is neat and gardeners can't get enough of it. It's habit needs work (a single pinch is recommended) and it will likely never become a mainstream plant, but never underes-

timate the concept of fun, after all, that is what gardening is supposed to be. Perennial in zone 8-10.


**Arum lily**, proper name *Arum italicum*. Fruit on perennials is not particularly fashionable, and seldom discussed in mixed company. However, this plant should be an easy sale, if all aspects of its growth habit are properly marketed. Propagated by seed or division, plants can be grown-on in 4" to gallon containers.

Liners are also in demand. They provide beautiful variegated leaves in winter and spring, therefore spring sales should not be a problem. In the landscape, large white flowers appear, often hidden by the spring foliage. Together, these two attributes, along with the fact it is hardy to zone 4, should sell plants with relative ease.

However, in case people need additional persuasion, tell them about the fact that in late summer and fall, where there was nothing, gorgeous spikes of orange fruit appear like magic. If containers are kept outdoors, the appearance of the fruit in the container is enough to spur sales in the fall as well. No pests or diseases I am aware of, but the downside is that plants go dormant in the summer, until the fruit reappear. However, any good marketing can easily reduce that problem to ashes by concentrating on the foliage, flower and most of all the fruit.

**How to market:** All three of the plants mentioned here flower in the spring when traffic is greatest in retail, and when people's plant libido is greatest. However, the appearance of handsome fruit, which does not occur until late summer or fall, should be an important part of marketing these, and similar, plants to the landscaper and gardener. Point of purchase, good photos and knowledge of the plant go a long way. They can easily be showcased with other plants which have ornamental features in the fall, including plants discussed last week or even Dr Dirr's woody material.

Can't lose by trying!!

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