

BRINGING NEW PLANTS TO CUSTOMERS

by Sue Watkins, Tallahassee Nurseries, Inc.



Introducing new plants is all the talk today. We here at Tallahassee Nurseries are believers. Customers do return frequently for more 'new and different.' I'm frequently asked how we decide which new plants to offer and how do we find them.

Until recently it was quite a chore to locate what you wanted. We have been lucky to have a few growers more than willing to stick their necks out with us. I heard more

than once I was a sales rep's worst nightmare because of the amount of effort needed to locate seed (plugs were not a consideration back when). We've come a long way! Today plug growers select desirable new plants and we only have to read catalogs and place orders early to acquire them.

In the off season we visit arboreta, trial gardens and other nurseries to see the performance of known and unknown flowering plants. These resources are invaluable to the grower and retailer and provide an enormous service to our industry. With little effort we can see at a few sites a concentration of field-grown plants which simulates the home gardener's experience. (Tantalizing new plants do not always get released by the breeders however.) We attend seminars to hear what is suggested as 'must-haves.' We know the customer really only cares about 'pretty' and 'successful' so we must discriminate among all we see and hear. People in the south talk about heat and humidity, but let me assure you the deep south suffers in summer! If Dr. Armitage says a flower melted in Athens, Georgia, it does not have a prayer in Tallahassee! We listen closely to him and others from that neck of the woods. Also, trial gardens at Disney World and the Bradenton Research Station in Florida offer useful evaluations to heat tolerance and overall performance for annual bedding plants. Additionally, flower awards mean something. We take note of All America Selection Winners (AAS), Georgia Gold Medal Winners, and Fleuroselect Gold Medal selections. These designations indicate superior performance in their class, a great gimmie for marketing to the public.

Sometimes we acquire one cutting with just a promise of 'wow and wonderful.' With this we will grow maybe twenty-five to fifty

plants to test the market. Some will be planted on the nursery property for observation by us and our customers. We might give several to local gardeners for feedback. If we are all thrilled, we will ask a grower to produce larger quantities the following year. It generally takes us three years to develop a demand for a new flower. Some examples of this are: Verbena 'Homestead purple,' Pentus lanceolata, 'Party' begonias, and cleome, all now standard fare and available in plugs.

Customers spread the word when they are successful and return for more so identification is important. Plant tags have come a long way but many new plants lack industry-generated ones. We ask the grower to stick tag each perennial or annual with the correct name whether it be by computer program or handwritten. If a good magazine picture is found, we will laminate it. Or we take our own pictures and laminate them. This is the promise of what is to come whetting customers' enthusiasm. Written signs give basic information on siting the plant correctly with suggestions for best care. Of course there are incidences when we know very little about an offering so we say this on our sign. Admitting our ignorance seems to appeal to our more pioneering customers.

Not all our new offerings have been whopping successes. We have stumbled through a few less than terrific ones but tried to insure our grower did not suffer too. When a customer returns to say how much fun it was to grow something new and different, we are rewarded for all our efforts!

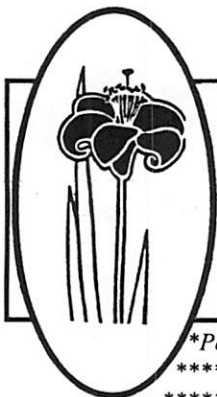


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