

# “Careless” Plant Producers Resulting in Mislabeled Transplants Will not be Tolerated

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Following is an article taken from the San Antonio newspaper concerning a case of mislabeling and corrective action taken by a local group. Mislabeling of plant material has been drawn to my attention by several people. It is primarily being done on petunias and tomatoes. Some growers feel they grow the best varieties but people don't know the new names. So, some growers have been labeling the new varieties with the old variety name. You're not doing anyone a service with this practice. Remember the problem we had with the Federal Trade Commission earlier and their investigation on the need to label plants. If you don't want the federal government looking over your shoulder, please label correctly. Whatever your excuse for mislabeling, it isn't valid! If you are mislabeling, you must take the responsibility for what happens and you're not helping our industry. It has taken us all a long time to build a strong bedding plant industry — don't destroy it with your mislabeling practices! - Ed.

The nursery business is highly competitive. A nurseryman with the right merchandise at the right time in the right place is the man who will make the sale. The ability of a nurseryman to predict the demand for a certain product and secure a sufficient quantity of that product to satisfy such demands will make the difference between a profit or a loss.

To be an effective merchandiser must be one of the ultimate goals of a successful nurseryman. However, success in the nursery business also depends on a favorable combination of several other variables. One of the most valuable assets which a nursery business can have is a good reputation. A good reputation cannot be purchased — it is earned through integrity and honest dealings with customers. It is earned by nurserymen who sell good merchandise at a reasonable price.

The buying public relies on reputable nurserymen to accurately label, display and describe what is being sold. Moreover, gardeners feel that nurserymen should not sell products which are not effective or not adapted to a particular season or area. Many nurseries sell anything that a gullible public will purchase whether or not the merchandise will ever be of benefit to a gardening success. Such merchandisers do make money, but the nursery industry as a whole suffers.

Gardening success generates sales to return customers but failure eliminates the gardening interest and consequential nursery profits. Polls indicate that gardeners rely heavily on nurseries as a source of accurate information. If merchandising is the sole motive of a

nurseryman, gardener success will not be enhanced and potential profits will be limited.

In many instances, nurserymen inflict failure on the buying public by not carefully selecting wholesale suppliers. Wholesale suppliers, especially of plants, must be trusted by retail nurserymen to provide accurately labeled, high quality plants at the appropriate time. Mistakes, intentional or not, at the wholesale level can be disastrous to retail nurserymen and, consequently, the buying public.

Such was a situation which developed in southcentral Texas during a fall vegetable promotion. The situation involved a tomato variety which was introduced by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service several years ago — the Spring Giant — and a tomato which was falsely labeled as Spring Giant which was eventually referred to as a “rogue.”

Spring Giant is the earliest maturing, largest fruited tomato variety available. It is the best, most reliable variety in nematode-free gardens or containers. The statement has often been made that Spring Giant will not produce in only two instances — when nematodes are present or when the transplant purchased is not truly a Spring Giant. Such strong statements can only be made about a variety which has been tested and proven reliable in spring and fall growing seasons for the past five years.

Confidence in the Spring Giant tomato caused south Texas transplant producers to add it to their tomato variety list. Such an addition made Spring Giant available for nursery purchase and subsequently available for gardeners to conveniently purchase at local nurseries.

After five years of resounding success and satisfaction with Spring Giant, which spread its popularity and notoriety to Houston, Austin, Corpus Christi and Dallas, other commercial wholesale producers began growing and selling transplants labeled as Spring Giant.

The Spring Giant tomato is a hybrid. Hybrid plants are created by “mating” two entirely different plants and saving the seed of the resulting fruit. Since this process involves a lot of manual labor, the seeds are expensive — \$400 per pound. The use of hybrid seed usually means a more costly transplant for the retail nurseryman and subsequently the home gardener. But the price of a hybrid is worth it!

Coincidentally, the adaptability to fall growing conditions of the types of transplant containers being sold in San Antonio, i.e. how easily transplants in each container type could adapt to fall planting conditions, was tested. For quick results, the Spring Giant tomato variety was chosen.

As the growing season progressed, it became painfully obvious to all concerned that the test Spring Giant transplants were not Spring

Giant. Other Spring Giant transplants, which were known to actually be the Spring Giant, planted in the same field were yielding 20 pounds of tomatoes per plant while the Spring Giant “rogue” had produced very little fruit.

To substantiate exactly how many of these mislabeled Spring Giant transplants had contaminated the San Antonio market the following alert was published in a San Antonio newspaper.

“This fall there is a rogue on the loose! Your help is needed to determine exactly how many of these rogue plants, sold as Spring Giant, are decreasing production potentials of fall tomatoes.”

“How can you identify this rogue? Some novice gardeners can barely recognize a tomato plant much less differentiate varieties! There are several distinct characteristics which will identify the rogue plants.”

“The rogue transplants were sold in packets containing white, rounded labels such as pictured in the accompanying photograph. Other transplants sold as Spring Giant were labeled with flat, colorful labels.”

“Other distinctive characteristics of the rogue are light green foliage, lobed fruit and lack of dark green color on the shoulders of the tomato fruit before it ripens. The normal Spring Giant is a deep globe shaped tomato; the rogue tomato is flat. Of course, absence of the exceptional fruit yields characteristic of Spring Giant is the most obvious characteristic. A plant of Spring Giant planted in early August should have no less than 30 tomatoes per plant by mid-October.”

The response indicated that these mislabeled transplants were spoiling fall tomato production for thousands of south Texas gardeners. The reputation of a superior tomato variety which took years of testing and evaluation to find was being destroyed. What could be done?

The nurseries which had been selling the mislabeled transplants were confronted. There are very few vegetable experts who can distinguish between tomato varieties in the transplant stage so obviously nursery management was not aware that mislabeled plants had been sold. Such a confrontation could have generated a hostile reaction or denials. Instead, the news of the rogue Spring Giant generated concern and immediate action to establish the truth of why such an incident happened.

The quest for truth yielded a very “careless” grower. Since most retail nurseries purchase all transplants sold from wholesale producers, mislabeled transplants could easily saturate a market and destroy the reputation of a vegetable variety. Such a “mistake” by a careless grower would be profitable to such a

grower since the expense of hybrid seed would be avoided.

This testing program will be continued for an indefinite period of time.

Suppliers of transplants in the San Antonio area will be alerted to the existence of this testing program and advised of the legal action which will be taken if this situation arises again.

Involved nurseries have been notified that every available means of gardener notification available will be used to identify which nurseries cannot be relied upon to sell accurately labelled transplants if such an incident occurs again.

Hopefully, this testing program will encourage retail nurserymen to be more cautious when

buying "good deal" plants and will alert wholesale nurserymen to the fact that mislabelled products will not be tolerated.

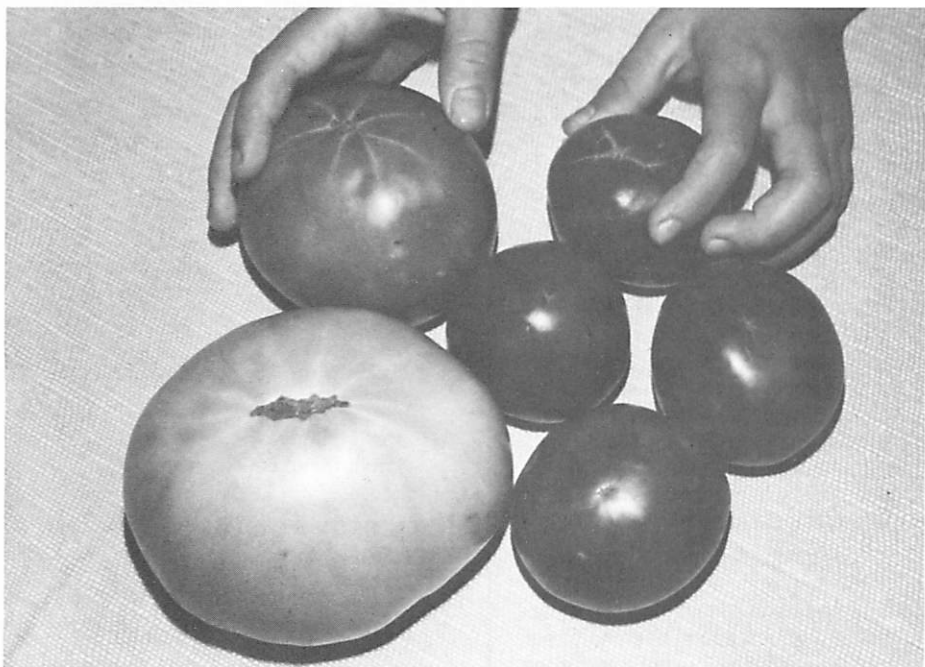
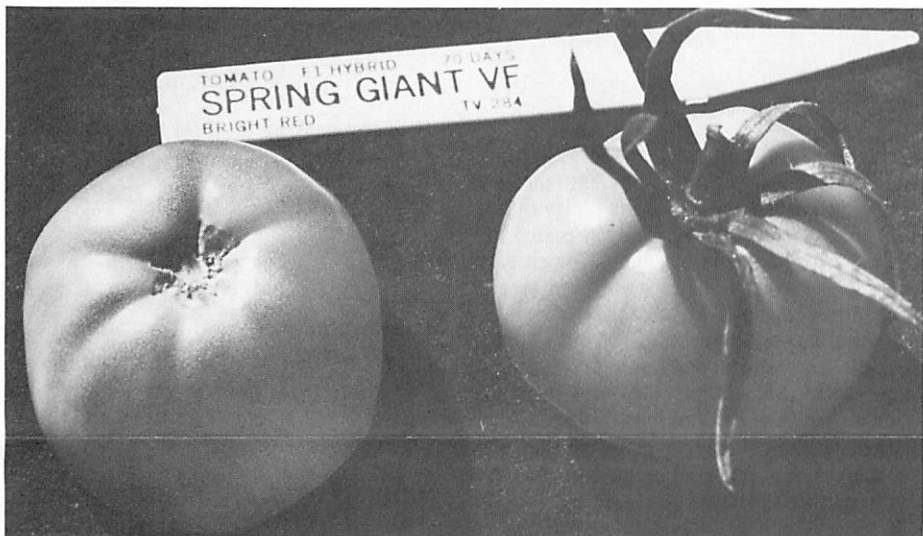
The incident emphasizes how a bad situation can be corrected by conscientious, professional nurserymen working with the Agricultural Extension Service. Had these rogue plants been sold by street peddlers who sell and relocate, no action could have been taken. Nurserymen **must** guarantee the quality of their products or public mistrust will destroy their business.

Water under the bridge is hard to retrieve! It doesn't do much good to shut the corral gate after the livestock are loose! It was obvious to the concerned nurseries that the situation was an irreversible situation — the damage could not be corrected. It was also apparent that no one wanted it to happen again! It **will not**

happen again, especially to Extension recommended varieties. Professionals of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service work too hard identifying these superior varieties to allow mislabelling of transplants to destroy them.

To prevent this from occurring again, the Extension Service, in cooperation with local wholesale and retail nurserymen, have established a vegetable variety testing program in south Texas.

Involved nurseries have agreed to furnish upon request of a member of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service at least 20 transplants of each vegetable variety being sold from randomly selected garden centers. These vegetable transplants will be grown to maturity and verified as to trueness of variety. Tests will be conducted during the spring and fall season.



A Tomato [R in top photo], falsely labeled as Spring Giant with the white, rounded labels pictured and distinguished by lobed fruit, lack of production and lack of dark green color on the shoulders of the fruit, greatly decreased

the production quality and quantity of fall gardens. Below, large Spring Giant tomato is compared with normal size tomatoes of the "rogue" transplants which were sold as Spring Giants [Photos by Dr. J. M. Parsons.]