

# Perennials: Basics of Profitable Production (Part I)

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There is an old saying that “those who can, do; those that can’t do, teach; those that can’t teach, coach; and those that can’t coach, cheer.” With respect to perennials, I fall somewhere between the teaching and coaching categories, yet Holly has had much more experience with perennials. We have tried to pull together information from those who are more experienced in the art and science of perennial production, and this handout is a compilation of that research.

Before we plunge into production technology, it may be useful to try and gain some appreciation for the perennial industry and to examine how a grower may approach entering the perennial market. As with any crop, gaining a perspective and planning are as important as actual production.

## Perennials: A Perspective

Producing perennials as a greenhouse crop is easily justified, given the popularity of the plants with the public. Perennials offer more variety in product lines, extend sales windows later into summer (than many annuals), and in most cases they can be “plugged into” existing production facilities and systems designed for production of annual bedding plants. However, just as a grower would carefully plan the annual mix prior to spring sales, a perennial plan is also required. Where do you begin? Three basic questions need to be addressed before you decide what (if anything) you can produce profitably: (1) What market(s) is/are available; (2) What products are needed; and (3) When are products needed?

**Marketing Channels:** You may already have established which markets are best for you to supply and if so you shouldn’t change just for a portion of your product line. There are drastic differences between growing for mass market outlets and growing for retail garden centers with respect to perennials, and your product line will vary with each market. Growing for landscaper clientele will also affect both species and product sizes offered.

We conducted an informal survey by talking to producers supplying mass market outlets and by visiting mass market outlets in the area. Product size ranged from 4 inch material up to 3 gallon containers; the majority being 1 gallon material. Most mass merchandisers (and their suppliers) offered only the most popular genera and a fairly narrow selection of perennials. The most species we counted in the mass marketplace was 42; the average was 23.

A study conducted by Charles Safley (Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics, NCSU) in 1991 examined the purchases customers made during the spring season at 18 garden centers located in five geographical regions across North Carolina. Plant purchases were categorized as indoor plants, herbs, trees

& shrubs, perennials, annuals, hanging baskets, and vegetables. Results of the survey indicated that a significant number of customers (16%) did indeed purchase perennials (Figure 1). The total value of perennial purchases only accounted for 10.6% of plants sales (Figure 2), but there were more species of perennials (76) sold than any other plant category; even more than trees & shrubs (Figure 3). Retail garden centers sell a much larger selection of perennials than mass merchandisers and if you intend to address this market, your product mix should be much greater than for mass merchandisers.

Another expanding part of the wholesale market is the use of perennials in public and municipal plantings. Characteristics that have won over landscapers and state DOT’s include salt tolerance; erosion control potential; no mowing requirements; and early-mid-, and late-season bloom periods. Day lilies, hostas, *Rudbeckia*, and perennial *Helianthus* are among the favorites for large-scale displays and roadside plantings. Established 1 and 3 gallon sizes are preferred for those high impact (and often high stress) situations.

**Product Line:** Various surveys conducted over the past few years have yielded valuable information as to the most popular perennial genera, species, and cultivars (Tables 1, 2, and 3). These lists should give you a good starting point in deciding which perennials may be worth producing.

Growers should keep abreast of the “fashion trends” in perennials. A single article in a magazine such as *Southern Living* highlighting a particular genus, species, or cultivar nearly always results in instantaneous sellouts and increases demand for the featured perennial. Perennial buyers are becoming increasingly more sophisticated and knowledgeable; requesting new and unusual offerings from their local garden center.

But hand in hand with popularity goes current availability and competition. There’s no need to produce it if the market is already saturated. Be aware your competition now includes a significant number of container nurseries. Traditional bastions of woody plant production are now delving into herbaceous perennials with gusto. The product mix of woodies, ornamental grasses, and perennials offers one-stop shopping for retail outlets and landscapers looking for material.

With respect to product sizes, it appears that 4 to 5 inch material is more popular during the spring sales period and larger (1 and 3 gallon) containers fare better during summer sales. However, most retailers offer gallons during the spring season as well as smaller material.

Dale Groff of Greenleaf Enterprises asks the following questions to help decide whether or not to produce a new item:

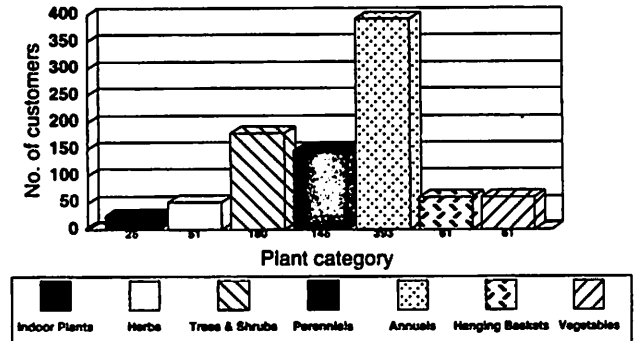
1. Is there presently a demand for the item, or can we create a sufficient demand easily?
2. Can we produce the item in sufficient quantity to meet the marketing window?
3. Will this item be a true perennial for most of the markets we address?
4. Is this item susceptible to disease and/or insects?
5. If vegetatively propagated, will this item require a great amount of stock plants in proportion to cuttings produced?
6. If seed propagated, is there seed available, and at a reasonable cost?
7. Does this item need to be held for a long period of time?
8. Can this item be sold at a profit?

**Product Availability:** The traditional picture of perennial production included crops in large containers outdoors which were overwintered for spring sales. Plants would often be sold green. The market has now expanded to include sales of non-cooled plants in the fall, non-cooled plants in the spring (green; no flowers at sales), and cooled plants in the spring in smaller containers for gardeners and landscapers. Your product availability should be based on sales potential for a given period.

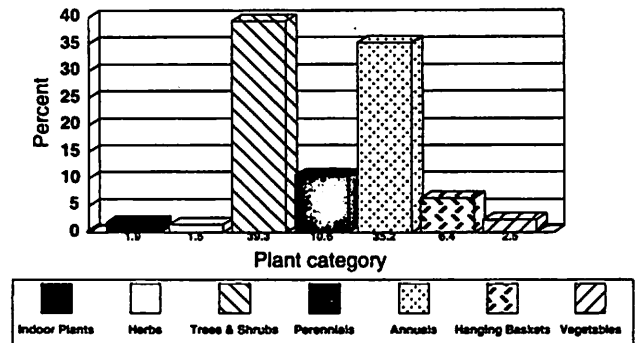
It is possible to force many species of perennials into bloom for spring sales. It may also be beneficial to force some summer-flowering perennials into bloom during the spring sales period to help customers see what the final product will look like later in the season.

*(To be Continued)*

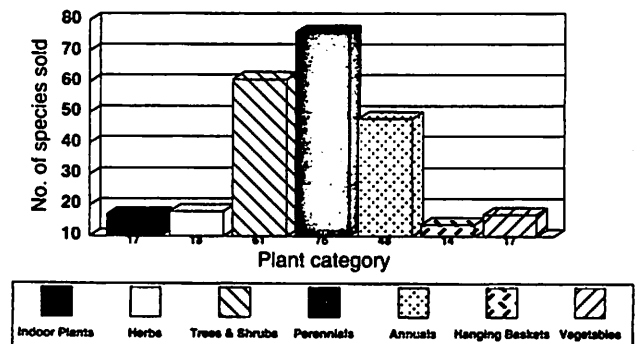
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*Figure 1. Number of customers purchasing plants in each plant category.*



*Figure 2. Percent (of \$) of total plant sales.*



*Figure 3. Number of species sold in each plant category.*

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**Table 1. Top-selling perennial genera in 1993.\***

Rank	Genera
1	<i>Hosta</i>
2	<i>Hemerocallis</i>
3	<i>Coreopsis</i>
4	<i>Astilbe</i>
5	Grasses
6	<i>Phlox</i>
7	<i>Rudbeckia</i>
8	<i>Chrysanthemum</i>
9	Herbs
10.5	<i>Sedum</i>
10.5	<i>Delphinium</i>
12	<i>Geum</i>
13.5	<i>Echinacea</i>
13.5	Ferns
16	<i>Veronica</i>
16	<i>Dianthus</i>
16	<i>Dicentra</i>
19	<i>Salvia</i>
19	<i>Iris</i>
19	<i>Heuchera</i>

\*From Rhodus, 1995.


**Table 2. Top-selling seed perennials at C. Raker and Sons, 1994-1995.\***

Rank	Cultivar
1	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i> 'Snowflake'
2	<i>Leucanthemum x superbum</i> ** 'Snow Lady'
3	<i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> 'Goldsturm'
4	<i>Coreopsis grandiflora</i> 'Early Sunrise'
5	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i> 'Bravado'
6	<i>Heuchera micrantha</i> 'Palace Purple'
7	<i>Gaillardia x grandiflora</i> 'Goblin'
8	<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> 'Munstead Dwarf'
9	<i>Dianthus deltoides</i> 'Zing Rose'
10	<i>Primula x polyantha</i> 'Pacific Giants Mixed'
11	<i>Platycodon grandiflorus</i> 'Sentimental Blue'
12	<i>Delphinium x elatum</i> 'Magic Fountains Mix'
13	<i>Heuchera sanguinea</i> 'Bressingham Hybrids'
14	<i>Campanula carpatica</i> 'Blue Clips'
15	<i>Leucanthemum x superbum</i> ** 'Alaska'

\*From Karlovich, 1995.

\*\*Shasta daisy was formerly *Chrysanthemum x superbum*.

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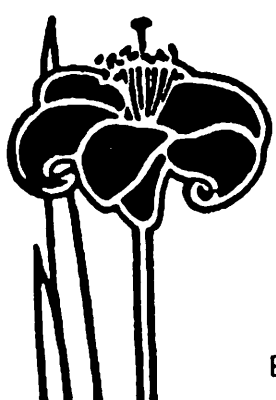
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**Table 3. Top 25 perennials sold at Greenleaf Enterprises, Leola, Pennsylvania.**

Rank	Sorted by variety	Source	Sorted by genus
1	<i>Artemisia schmidtiana</i> 'Silver Mound'	Cuttings	<i>Phlox</i>
2	<i>Phlox subulata</i> 'Emerald Blue'	Cuttings	<i>Coreopsis</i>
3	<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i> 'Moonbeam'	Cuttings	<i>Artemisia</i>
4	<i>Phlox subulata</i> 'Emerald Pink'	Cuttings	<i>Sedum</i>
5	<i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> 'Goldsturm'	Cuttings	<i>Dianthus</i>
6	<i>Phlox subulata</i> 'White Delight'	Cuttings	<i>Iberis</i>
7	<i>Coreopsis rosea</i> 'Nana'	Cuttings	<i>Aster</i>
8	<i>Cerastostigma plumbaginoides</i>	Cuttings	<i>Achillea</i>
9	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i> 'Alexander White'	Cuttings	<i>Rudbeckia</i>
10	<i>Sedum</i> x 'Autumn Joy'	Cuttings	<i>Veronica</i>
11	<i>Phlox subulata</i> 'Scarlet Flame'	Cuttings	Shasta Daisy
12	<i>Veronica longifolia</i> 'Sunny Border Blue'	Cuttings	<i>Cerastostigma plumbaginoides</i>
13	<i>Primula</i> x <i>polyantha</i> 'Pacific Giants'	Seed	<i>Anemone</i>
14	<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i> 'Zagreb'	Cuttings	<i>Gypsophila</i>
15	<i>Phlox subulata</i> 'Red Wings'	Cuttings	<i>Monarda</i>
16	<i>Aster</i> x <i>frikartii</i> 'Monch'	Cuttings	Poppy
17	<i>Hypericum calycinum</i>	Both	<i>Lythrum</i>
18	<i>Dianthus gratianopolitanus</i> 'Tiny Rubies'	Cuttings	<i>Echinacea</i>
19	<i>Dianthus gratianopolitanus</i> 'Spotty'	Cuttings	<i>Salvia</i>
20	<i>Lythrum virgatum</i> 'Morden Pink'	Cuttings	<i>Campanula</i>
21	<i>Artemisia ludoviciana</i> 'Silver King'	Cuttings	<i>Gaillardia</i>
22	<i>Leucanthemum</i> x <i>superbum</i> ** 'Snow Lady'	Seed	<i>Hypericum</i>
23	<i>Hypericum patulum</i> 'Hidcote'	Cuttings	<i>Delphinium</i>
24	<i>Pervoskia atriplicifolia</i>	Cuttings	<i>Aquilegia</i>
25	<i>Veronica spicata</i> 'Red Fox'	Cuttings	<i>Oenothera</i>

\*From Groff, 1991.

\*\*Shasta daisy was formerly *Chrysanthemum* x *superbum*.



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