

Grower to Grower

by JEAN D. AYLSWORTH



Selling to Supermarkets

SUPERMARKET floral departments have become the front lines in the battle for consumers' dollars. In-store departments are taking on a fresh, new look and more space than ever before is being allocated to plants and flowers — partly because supermarket management has found that the profit margin for floral products is higher than for most other items in their stores.

At the recent Produce Marketing Association (PMA) Convention in Nashville, TN, a large number of greenhouse and floral companies were represented. With nearly 8000 people in attendance, it was a perfect opportunity for those who sell to supermarkets — or would like to — to make valuable contacts.

Here's what a few growers had to say about the PMA convention and the opportunities that abound in selling to supermarkets.

Reinhold Holtkamp Sr. (center) and his daughter Margit (right) talk violets with a potential customer at the PMA Convention.



TENNESSEE

With the PMA convention right in his backyard, **Reinhold Holtkamp Sr.**, of **Holtkamp's, Nashville**, couldn't pass up the opportunity to show off his Optimara violets. In addition to an impressive array of violets at the company's booth in the exhibition hall, Holtkamp took advantage of the Opryland Hotel's lush atrium to tuck in colorful violet displays. Likewise, the lobby just outside the exhibit hall was turned into a showcase of violets, arranged in various striking patterns.

"This was a wonderful opportunity for us," Holtkamp says. "When will we ever have this kind of a chance again?"

Holtkamp used the convention to launch his newest idea, the Optimara MiniWell, a multi-sided acrylic reservoir that neatly holds an individual

Little Jewel miniature violet.

Holtkamp also opened his modern, automated greenhouse facility to many interested PMA members who toured it the final day of the convention.

NEW JERSEY

Kirk Slater, of **Geerlings, Piscataway**, says his company has been exhibiting at PMA for the past 11 years.

"It projects a good image for us," he says. "By being there we show we are concerned about the supermarkets' needs."

Slater says that as supermarkets make a concentrated effort to expand their floral departments, it's important for growers to stay on top of current trends and to work closely with buyers in mapping out programs well in advance.

"Growers have to realize that each customer is unique and each has a different market," he says. "You have to gear your product line to each one. We like to sit down with buyers six months to a year in advance to try to determine their needs. This enables us to allocate our greenhouse space accordingly. That's something more growers have to do. Growing on speculation is a thing of the past."

Slater says that as consumers have become better educated about floral products and are looking for quality, supermarket buyers are demanding top quality products.

"But price is still a factor," he says. "Our job is to prove to them that our quality and service are worth the price we are charging for our products. Growers need to be more

aware of their costs and to stick to their guns on prices.

"All of our costs are up — everything from pots to labor and transportation. If we are going to produce top quality plants, we have to get a fair price."

Geerlings produces potted plants, including foliage and blooming plants. The company also does a tremendous business with novelty items.

"We try to tie in a novelty item with a holiday," Slater says. "Supermarket buyers are always looking for something new. We have to constantly rethink what we are doing and be ready to shift emphasis as the market changes.

"If growers are going to succeed in selling to supermarkets, they have to get away from an agricultural mentality and go more toward a business mentality. There is a lot more in-

involved these days than just producing the crop."

NEW MEXICO

"To me, it's *the* show to attend," says **Doug Painter**, of **Aldershot of New Mexico, Las Cruces**. "Most of our business is with the supermarket people and most of them go to PMA. So it's a place where we can show that we are interested in their business and we get to see a lot of our customers at one time."

Aldershot has been exhibiting at PMA for four years and in that time Painter says the number of greenhouse exhibitors has jumped significantly.

"More and more growers are realizing that supermarket sales can be very lucrative," he says. "I think the biggest growth area right now is in cut flowers, but our major items are mums and kalanchoes — and blooming potted plants are definitely on the upswing as well."

Painter says supermarket personnel do a better job now in caring for plant material and merchandising it than they have in the past, although improvements still can be made.

"I think everyone ought to be dating floral products like they do with milk," he says. "We are selling freshness and if our product stays on the shelf too long and the consumer isn't happy with it, we won't get repeat sales. So it's a disservice to everybody if it isn't dated."

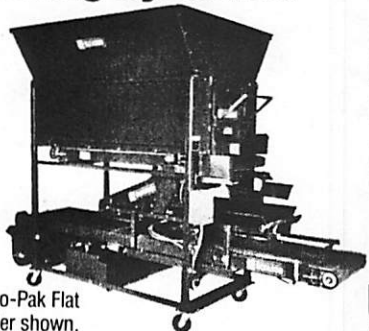
FLORIDA

"PMA is worthwhile to us as a company because there is so much expansion going on in the mass market in terms of floral sales," says **Duane Bennett**, general manager of **Southern Ornamental Plants, Boynton Beach**. "In business terms, that's where the emphasis is now — in supermarket floral departments. They could put some retail florists out of business."

He notes, however, that foliage sales aren't keeping pace with those of cut flowers.

"The biggest thing right now is the mixed bouquet," he says. "There are fewer foliage exhibitors at PMA and more cut flower people. I see a decrease in demand toward foliage among the chain store buyers. But we will continue to be here." **GG**

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