

The Outlook for Perennials Is Positive

*Mel Garber, Extension Horticulturist-Nursery Crops
The University of Georgia, Tifton*

The demand for perennials has been increasing rapidly over the past several years. What once was considered a specialty item for the small grower is now a major component of the product mix for many of the large producers. A question raised periodically is whether the increased interest in perennials is a "fad" or a longer term trend driven by sustainable market forces. I have been conducting market research on the landscape/nursery industry in Georgia the past several years and believe that perennials are here to stay and that demand will probably increase. There are, however, a few things in the marketplace we can do to enhance the likelihood of increased demand. This article summarizes market research data as it relates to growers of perennials and discusses (1) opportunities to increase market penetration in the landscape industry, (2) who influences demand in the landscape industry and their view of perennials and (3) steps growers can take to stimulate demand for perennials.

Landscape Use

The research data used in this article was collected from the landscape market and applies directly to that market. Implications for retail marketing will be covered later. The marketing information was gathered from a survey of landscape architects and landscape installers in Georgia with a response rate of 37 percent and 43 percent, respectively. The information provides insight into relationships among growers, landscape installers and landscape architects that is

important to marketing perennials and other product lines.

Distribution Channel for Increased Sales

If you are a grower selling to the landscape industry you probably sell directly to a landscape installer. The landscape installer is generally responsible for plant purchase and plant installation. In Georgia, landscape installers purchased about 72 percent of their plants direct from growers. Approximately 22 percent of plant material is purchased from re-wholesalers and the remainder primarily from brokers (5%) and garden centers (1%). A good way to increase your penetration of the landscape market is to make use of the re-wholesalers — an emerging player in the supply of plant material and hardgoods to the landscape trade.

The market research data suggest that if you are selling to the landscape trade and are not using re-wholesalers, you are missing out on about 22 percent of the market. The re-wholesaler is an especially important avenue to serve the many small landscape installation firms that may be difficult to serve individually. In my Georgia survey, the small (37%) and medium (36%) size landscape installation firms purchased about twice as much of their plant material from re-wholesalers than did the large (16%) landscape firms. The re-wholesalers have seen increased sales of perennials in the past several years and are very interested in your product.

Who Determines Demand in the Landscape Market?

If we are to understand why the high level of demand for perennials and how we might increase future demand, we need a good understanding of who determines demand. An initial reaction might be that landscape installers must determine demand since they purchase the plant material for landscape projects. However, we know that for many of the large commercial, governmental and residential projects that landscape architects are involved in the landscape design. In that role, landscape architects specify which plants will be used and hence which plants the landscape installer purchases. To better understand the relationship between landscape architects, landscape



Kirk Clark
Nursery Consultant

KIRK NURSERY
CONSULTANTS

803-377-1213

Office:
144 York Street
Chester, SC 29706

Mail:
P.O. Box 96
Chester, SC 29706 U.S.A.

contractors and growers, I conducted market research studies on the decision making and plant material trends as viewed by these two groups.

In Georgia, I found that 76 percent of the plant material purchased by landscape installers had been specified by landscape architects. This says that landscape architects are having a major influence on which plants are used in the landscape market, including herbaceous perennials. The percentage of plants specified by landscape architects varied with the size of the landscape installation firm, with large firms (84%) having more plants specified by landscape architects than small (29%) or medium size (40%) firms. The large landscape installation firms had annual plant purchases of between \$200,000 and \$2,000,000. This suggests that growers should have a marketing plan that directs resources toward landscape architects and landscape installers. Question your landscape installer customers regarding their relationship with landscape architects and focus resources accordingly. At a minimum you should be aware of plant materials specified by landscape architects, because this will influence purchasing decisions of all firms, including smaller firms that observe plants in commercial and residential landscapes.

Future Demand for Perennials in the Landscape Market?

I am very optimistic about the opportunity for a sustained increase in the future demand for perennials.

Some of that conviction comes from the survey of landscape architects and landscape installers. Landscape architects were asked to identify trends that could affect the type of plants specified for landscape projects. The trends identified, in descending order, were (1) availability or lack of water, (2) need for low maintenance landscapes, (3) environmental movement and emphasis on naturalized landscapes, (4) more color, especially from perennial plants, (5) less pesticide use in the landscape and (6) smaller areas to landscape. The same question on plant material trends in a subsequent survey of landscape installers resulted in identification of essentially the same trends.

Perennials represent about 6 percent of the value of plants specified by landscape architects. However when asked to rate the future need for nine categories of plants (less, same, more), perennials received the highest rating. About two-thirds of the firms indicated that they would use more perennials in the future. This is a very positive sign for future sales of perennials from a group with significant influence on demand.

Conversations with landscape architects reveal further insight into why they use, and might continue to increase their use, of perennials. Herbaceous perennials are viewed as middle-of-the-road in terms of amount of water required. But perennials are viewed as capable of withstanding dry periods and even if they are adversely affected, they are at least capable of recovering from the period of drought, e.g. they are fairly tough and survive drought/water restrictions.



WELLMASTER Greenhouse Equipment

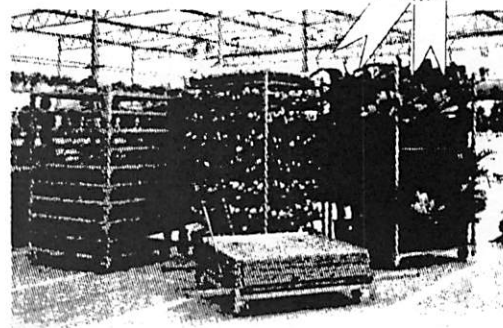
Specializing in Transportation and Merchandising Carts

Rectangular or Square
Transportation and Merchandising Carts

Danish-style expanded metal or
plywood shelves, completely adjustable

Assembly is hot dip galvanized after welding
NO RUSTING EVER

Carts can be completely disassembled
for compact storage



WELLMASTER

Greenhouse Equipment

Division of Wellmaster Pipe & Supply Inc.

P.O. Box 456, 62 Goshen St.
Tillsonburg, Ont. Canada N4G 4J1
Tel.: (519) 688-0500
Fax: (519) 688-0563

Or Contact
Donald Schipoff
111 Virginia Ct.
King, NC 27021-9204

1 (800) 983-6946

Selected
Dealer
Territories
Available

Perennials are viewed by landscape architects as low-maintenance plants that fit well in a naturalized (or other) landscape setting. The water requirements and maintenance requirements were the two key trends for landscape architects and the perception is that perennials fit both of these trends. As an industry we need to pay particular attention to these two traits when introducing new perennials. If we get too many problem plants in the marketplace, then we run the risk of landscape architects, or other users, waking up one morning and deciding that perennials are not low maintenance. At that point we could see decreased use.

Another factor driving the use of perennials is a desire to get more color in the landscape but at a lower cost and less maintenance than required for annuals. Perennials offer color but without the need to change annual beds two or three times a year. This implies that we should introduce and promote perennials with long periods of color (flowers and/or foliage) and promote the fact that they do not have to be replaced during the growing season. Growers in Georgia may enjoy a competitive advantage in the market place because landscape architects rated the quality of Georgia grown perennials higher than perennials obtained from other states. The higher quality should also translate into a higher price by producers of perennials (you deserve some profit).

Enhancing Future Demand for Perennials

While perennials are viewed in a positive light, growers can do several things to help increase future demand:

INTRODUCE LOW MAINTENANCE CULTIVARS/ VARIETIES. We know that all perennials are not low maintenance. Growers and plant breeders should screen and select plants for low maintenance features such as (a) free (or minimal) of disease and insect pests, (b) do not require extensive pruning or staking, and (c) can withstand periods of drought (will at least survive). We want to avoid the situation where perennials are viewed as a high maintenance item!

COMMUNICATE WITH LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS. Landscape architects are important decision makers in our industry and generally are not part of grower marketing plans. If you take part of the marketing resources currently directed to landscapers and direct it to landscape architects, you will get better results than directing all resources to landscapers. Growers need to send landscape architects information on available

products. Landscape architects are an especially important target to generate demand for new products. The information should be education based, e.g. emphasize how to use the plant in the landscape (shade vs. sun; wet area vs. dry area; etc.). Color photos of mature plants would be well received.

PROMOTE ATTRIBUTES THAT MATCH LANDSCAPE TRENDS. Highlight all attributes that relate to the trends identified by landscape architects. These might include attracting butterflies, length of color (flower and foliage), ability to withstand dry periods, need (or lack of) for pesticides, and the final size. If we promote perennials in the context of the landscape trends, we will tend to emphasize the plant attributes that are most important to landscape architects and landscape installers.

You may direct questions about this article or your landscape marketing plans to Mel Garber, The University of Georgia, P.O. Box 1209, Tifton, GA 31793 – 912-386-3410 – e-mail: mgarber@uga.cc.uga.edu

Hardin's Wholesale
Florist Supply
Potted Plants • Cut Flowers
Florist Supplies
Wholesalers of Fresh Flowers,
Potted Plants, Foliage Plants,
Florist Supplies, Silk & Dried Flowers
Premade Arrangements in Fresh or Silk
Quality Merchandise
Excellent Service • Low Prices
CALL TOLL FREE:
1-800-672-8226
We Ship Anywhere
255 W. Bowman Avenue, Liberty, NC 27298
(910) 622-3035 • FAX (910) 622-5443