

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Ball Sells Darwin Plants—But NOT Darwin Perennials

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Let's be clear right from the get-go: Ball Horticultural Company is NOT getting out of the perennial business. Far from it. But that's what some might assume when reading that the company is selling Witteman & Co. B.V., which does business under the name Darwin Plants. Darwin Plants is a Dutch division of Ball that sources and sells bare root perennials into various markets around the world, not to be confused with Darwin Perennials, Ball's vegetative perennial breeding and production business.

Ball bought Darwin Plants back in 2007 as a foot-in-the-door to the perennial market. Since then, they've built their own breeding program, invested in a perennial production farm in Colombia and turned Darwin Perennials into a force to be reckoned with in the perennial marketplace.

The buyer of Darwin Plants (aka Witteman, which will be used to avoid any more confusion) is Kébol B.V., a Dutch bulb company specializing in amaryllis, tulips and other dry bulbs. Why did they want to buy Witteman? Because their season runs June through November, with nothing much happening the rest of the year. They were looking for ways to utilize their staff, coolers and massive warehouse and distribution facilities the rest of the season. Conversely, Witteman ships its bare root perennials December through June, with the fall being their downtime. That makes the two companies a perfect fit.

We asked Darwin Perennials GM Mike Klopmeier why Ball decided to sell Witteman rather than find a way to fill in its off-season—say with a bulb company like Kébol. Mike said that it's because bare root perennials, while still important (and essential with some crops, such as hosta, daylily and astilbe), are less of an emphasis for Darwin Perennials than liners and tissue culture, which is what they now focus on. "Growers want a uniform input to get a uniform, predictable output," he says. "You get that more with a liner than you do with bare root."

Ball Seed and Star Roses & Plants will continue to source their bare root perennials from Darwin Plants by Kébol (as the company will now be known), so there's no change at all to customers except in who owns the company. "It's business as usual; it's just a different owner of the (bare root) business," says Mike. **GT**