

GROWERTALKS

Paul's Pointers

10/1/2018

Fall for Perennials

Paul Pilon



PAUL PILON

I can hear you now: "Paul's on his soap box, pushing fall perennials again." And my response is, "And why not?" Whether you're a grower or retailer, I can't imagine any business who wouldn't mind extending their sales windows or generating more sales revenue. If these are of interest to you, please read on—I have two approaches to marketing perennials in the fall I'd like to run by you.

Landscape perennials

The first is the traditional use of perennials in the landscape. For whatever reason, only a small number of consumers are looking to plant perennials in the fall. Fall perennial sales historically represent only a small fraction of those obtained in the spring. This is a fact. Fall sales will likely continue to lag, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they can't be increased.

There are several reasons fall perennials should be promoted. Fall is actually the perfect time of the year for planting perennials in the landscape. The main advantage of planting in the autumn is the cooler air temperatures. These cool air temperatures combined with warm soil temperatures allow the perennials to become established without the stresses often associated with spring conditions.

Think about it this way: In the spring, the temperatures get warmer each day (some years they get hotter by the day rather than just warmer). Additionally, there's usually less rainfall as the season progresses. This combination of hotter weather and less water often leads to stressed plants and delayed rooting and poorer establishment.

Conversely, planting perennials in the fall avoids many of the adverse conditions that leads to plant stress and decreased establishment. The days are shorter, the air temperatures cooler and the soil temperatures are more suitable for rooting compared with the spring or early summer conditions.

Fall planting allows the plants to become established under much less stressful conditions; the roots can grow without having to support months of top growth (and flowering for many perennials) during the summer. The shorter daylengths and cooler temperatures of autumn reduces transpiration (water lost through the leaves), decreases the likelihood of wilting and reduces the amount of transplant shock the plants would experience if they were planted other times of the year.

For most perennials, as long as the soil temperatures are above 50F (10C), the roots will continue to grow. Good root systems in the fall gives the plants a great head start when growth resumes in the spring.

The fall planting window varies by year and geographic location; a good rule of thumb is to finish planting in the landscape about six weeks before your area usually gets hit with its first hard frost. This will allow plenty of time for perennials to get themselves established before winter arrives.

To me, the fall is clearly a better time of the year for planting perennials. Additionally, a well-established perennial in the fall will usually lead to a bigger, better display of color the following year.

Perennials as decorations

If you've found it tough to market perennials in the fall for landscape uses, there's another huge opportunity to consider. Rather than selling perennials in the traditional manner, consider marketing them in more creative ways. I mean, if consumers aren't buying perennials for the landscape and the long-term value they offer in the fall, why not market them in the form they do want—colorful fall decorations?

With the popularity of fall festivals and Halloween, there are lots of opportunities to place colorful decorative containers of perennials in places where consumers abound and impulse purchasing is ripe for the picking. Consider offering colorful perennials alone or in combinations in decorative pots and container planters. Perennials with shades of yellow, orange or red are very popular this time of year. Coreopsis, echibeckia, echinacea, gaillardia, helenium and rudbeckia are just a few of the popular perennials suitable for fall sales. Don't forget about the highly decorative foliage items such as heuchera, ferns or hosta, which can offer both color and texture to these decorative items.

Marketing perennials in the fall as decorations rather than perennials will break down mental barriers and allow consumers to simply enjoy them for their fall beauty and satisfying their urge for instant gratification rather than being concerned with planting them into the landscape. It's definitely value added for consumers who know these plants and choose to plant them, but let's face it, most consumers are hungry for attractive decorations they can enjoy in their outside living spaces (decks, porches, patios, courtyards, etc.) in the autumn rather than planting a landscape. If that's how they want to purchase perennials in the fall, I say let's embrace it and sell all the decorations we can.

The fall is a fun time of year. Many people enjoy visiting orchards, farms and greenhouses for various fall festivities. If you host these types of events, be sure to include lots of colorful perennials in your fall displays and retail shelves. With their autumn colors, colorful plants like these will steal the show and virtually walk off the shelves.

Why should fall sales be reserved for garden mums and a few other short-lived annuals? Let's show consumers how beautiful and festive our colorful perennials can be and sell them (and lots of them) as fall decorations. **GT**

Paul Pilon is a Perennial Production Consultant and editor-at-large of the Perennial Pulse e-newsletter. Feel free to contact him with article topics or to address your perennial production challenges. He can be reached at paul@perennialsolutions.com.