

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Hey, Who Put My “Inside” Houseplant “Outside”?

Austin Bryant

(Editor's note: We'd like to welcome Austin to the GrowerTalks family and look forward to reading and sharing his insight!—JZ)

Like most superhero fantasies, it's no secret that some of our ordinary interior houseplants have been living a secret double life. They've been masquerading as just “normal” houseplants in one season and then over-performing as stunning exterior foliage color bowl centerpieces during the spring and summer seasons.

Where did this come from?

As an interior foliage grower, I first heard the term “bold tropical foliage” as it relates to exterior color bowls while sitting in an NHF (National Horticulture Foundation) board meeting listening to a highly energetic presentation from America in Bloom. I knew some of our houseplant numbers had been showing an increase during the magical color sales window of Weeks 11 through 20. We were also getting requests to pre-book plants for the following spring from some of our best customers to ensure they had the product to work with during that time.

This was a real blessing for some interior foliage growers in 2010. The foliage industry was going through one of the hardest economic times of this generation. To say the interior foliage industry was on the ropes would be an understatement, as growers in Apopka and Homestead were sporadically going out of business. A powerful word, wisely spoken to my father Theo Bryant when he first started the business, could not be more important today: “Diversify!”

I would like to say, as a salesman with my finger on the pulse of the industry, I saw this bold tropical foliage trend coming. I did not. The first few times we were asked to grow some of these “older-style plants— cordylines and alocasias”—for the exterior market, I respectfully said we weren't interested right now. However, after seeing the margins that same interior foliage could offer as spring product, I soon realized the fallacy in that decision.

“We don't grow what we like; we grow what sells. This is a business, not a hobby.” If the margins are there and the greenhouses space is open, then serious thought needs to be taken on whether to invest in new product. Of course, this doesn't mean throwing the whole kit-and-caboodle at a new item—treat it as an investment, not a gamble.

Where is this going?

For those who aren't intimately familiar with the interior foliage market, things move a bit slower in this industry. Finished plant crop times can be years, not months, and thus the rotations in trialing and incorporating new product

takes longer as well. This sudden surge in interest for tropical foliage products by both the retail IGCs, and for spring and fall “bold tropical foliage” has pushed foliage breeders into hyperdrive.

Unfortunately, for both growers and retailers, this feels like asking a turtle to run faster. There’s a desperate cry for new material in our market that cannot be ignored. This is what originally drove me to Cultivate in Ohio years ago. We’re constantly looking for any shade-loving, non-traditional foliage plant or succulent that might cross over into the interior market ... or possibly a traditional low-light interior plant that may tolerate higher-light conditions up north for exterior use ... find things at plant shows to invest in, not just sell ...

The interchange of ideas between breeders, growers, designers and retailers is priceless. Nothing makes a plant breeder happier than seeing their quality plant product being used outside its original scope or purpose—not just for the extra royalty, but because they bred a well-rounded, quality plant that can perform in multiple applications. Just as duct tape was originally designed for taping air ducting, I’m sure the inventor is glad people thought outside the box with their product and the world is better for it.

When trialing new potential products at Heart of Florida Greenhouses, we want to see the full scope of potential a plant has. Growing under different light conditions ranging from 30% to 83% shade is a must. Changes in leaf size, shape, internode length, foliage color, blooming characteristics and cold hardiness are noted. With an open mind for possible applications, every plant is a diamond in the rough.

The general love of plants the Millennial buying generation has is unprecedented. It’s a fun time to be in the industry, where trialing both new and older retro plants in unconventional light and growing conditions with a different sales application in mind can really pay dividends. **GT**

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