

GROWERTALKS

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All that Glitters

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GrowerTalks took to the road this past November and December, checking out poinsettia trials and events in Indiana, Florida, North Carolina and New Hampshire. Here's what we saw and heard, including new variety talk, cultural advice, marketing info and the growing fad (trend?) of painted poinsettias.

NCSU

Among the 15 to 20 greenhouse businesses represented at the National Poinsettia Trials at North Carolina State University in Raleigh on December 2, we saw North Carolina's largest growers: Metrolina Greenhouses, Rockwell Farms, Baucom's Nursery and Van Wingerden International. Sales reps and other industry members joined them to critique the crop.

The plant quality displayed various characteristics, but John Dole, director of the trials, was quick to point out, "We had some early problems with root rot and botrytis that affected the trials this year." That may have contributed to some of the plants seeming unusually short considering they were grown without PGRs (although floriculture technician Ingram McCall applied PGRs as needed to vigorous varieties.)

One variety that stood tall (literally, at 21.5 in.) was Ecke's new release, Visions of Grandeur. The pale-pink bracts (called "peach" in the literature) were unique in color and grand in size. Despite two spray applications of Cycocel/B-Nine (750/1,000 ppm) and one Bonzi drench (0.5 ppm), Visions of Grandeur was still 17.5 in. tall with no apparent effect on bract size or color.

Kris Krinkle, a red whose unique feature is excessive bract crinkling without the curl associated with the Winter Rose, had a nice shape and lovely red color, but the crinkle wasn't a feature so distinct that it carried a memorable impact. Holly Berry, perhaps an inappropriately named marble, had strong stems and upright growth that may make it a contender in the mass market.

The breeders seem to be concentrating their Jingle Bell-type breeding efforts on red with white specks and pink with white specks. There's still work to be done, however. Of the six plants in the trial, many displayed branches that had reverted to the original cultivar.

In the pink family, John prefers Enduring Pink from Ecke. He explains, "Many of the pinks turn gray as they age, but true to its name, Enduring Pink retains its color well." However, he warns that to achieve the target size, it may need a one- to two-week head start.

Dummen showed a purple (1035-RF0924) that competes with Fischer's Cortez Burgundy. The plants at NC State weren't in the best shape, two having lost branches. While some reversion was evident, the deep color was pleasing. We overheard Allen Hammer commenting on the purple, "We never get color like that [at Purdue]."

The white that most impressed John was Dummer's 10423-RF6925 (to be called Arctic White). It's a late-season variety that has the desirable almost-white color. The bracts were still smallish on December 2; we'd be interested to see the leaf expansion and color a week later.

There were new red introductions but nothing that's going to dominate the market. The majority of North Carolina reds are still Freedom with Prestige likely the second most popular. Most growers will acknowledge there are probably better varieties, but they're comfortable growing Freedom and simply don't want to move out of that comfort zone.

Though no single Selecta variety made the highlights list, they're perhaps the most underappreciated breeder of the trial participants. They produce consistent quality and offer multiple series covering the major color families. Selecta doesn't focus on marketing and haven't produced any knock-out novelties, but more than once we heard John recommend the Santa Claus series as "a vigorous variety that responds well to PGRs."— Megan Bame

Higher Price, Higher Value

Ecke is launching a tiered marketing program in 2005 that will include Visions of Grandeur and Kris Krinkle (a novelty red with crinkled bracts). These two varieties will only be available as part of a marketing package that includes the rooted cutting, a preformed pot cover, tag, poster and other marketing material, at a cost of \$2.00 per cutting with a minimum order of 100. The idea is that some products will only be available at the independent garden center, generating market interest that isn't available at the mass market and helping boost price through perceived value. Mass market growers may not want to pay \$2.00 for a cutting, but will smaller growers see value in a pot cover, tag, poster and so on? Beth Harden of Deep Well Flower Farm, Apex, North Carolina, is a small grower who was disappointed with the limited availability. Beth contends, "I sell to a high-end garden center with their own signature foil. They would love the plant, but I can't buy a marketing package they don't need."— M.B.

University of Florida

With four hurricanes hitting in two months, Florida's growing season was anything but normal. The cooler, cloudy weather took a toll on the height of many varieties.

Despite the challenging conditions, Dr. Jim Barrett and his team had 102 current and 30 to 35 experimental varieties ready for the trials, held December 7.

Growers meandered through the University of Florida's sawtooth greenhouse, viewing the varieties on trial and stopping at stations set up to provide growth regulator information about many varieties. For the second year in a row, there was a companion plant display set up to gather information about which plants might be marketed as companions to poinsettias during the holiday season.

During the day, Jim led two guided tours, giving growers highlights about each variety and allowing them to ask cultural questions.

Out of the many varieties making their first appearance at the Florida trials, there were several that stood out from the crowd. Ecke introduced Winter Rose Early Pink and Winter Rose Early Marble to join Winter Rose Early Red. These uniform plants flower a week earlier than their midseason counterparts and are less vigorous.

Cinnamon Star (Fischer) is an early-season variety that looks similar to their DaVinci, but has a more cinnamon color. Grown on the standard Freedom schedule, this variety didn't need any growth regulators.

Christmas Star (Selecta), with a natural flower date around November 30, is a midseason dark leaf red. It has a unique look with tight, star-shaped bracts and large cyathia and works well in a variety of size containers.

Rounding out the best of the new introductions in Florida are two more Ecke introductions popular at the other trials, Kris Krinkle and Visions of Grandeur. Kris Krinkle, an early season variety with unique, red crinkled bracts, is actually a sport from Freedom and grows under similar conditions, but is less vigorous. Visions of Grandeur, a mid-season novelty with a creamy pink color, is more difficult to grow because of its very high vigor. Research shows you should drench it early with PGRs, even before you pinch, for best results. —Laura Alexander

Florida Tidbits

- In South Florida, where standard varieties Freedom and Orion tend to stretch at the end of the crop, Jim Barrett recommends switching to Autumn Red or Velvetreen Red. These varieties, both from Ecke, are stronger plants in that area.
- If you're looking for a variety to follow Freedom in a warm climate that's more predictable and earlier than Prestige, try Mars or Christmas Feelings.
- Max Red, an Ecke introduction, hasn't caught on because it was introduced the same year as Prestige, but its nice bract presentation, upright growth and low vigor make it a winner.
- Searching for a white? White Christmas, from Selecta, offers the best color.
- If you've given up on Sonora White Glitter or Cortez Burgundy, it may be time to go back. Fisher has done a great job cleaning up the sporting in these varieties, and both rate highly with consumers.
- In warm climates, be careful when trying Visions of Grandeur in large pots. Because this variety is so vigorous, it can grow too fast and may be unable to support long branches. In Florida, get some experience with it before you try it in large pots. — L.A.

Pleasant View Gardens

In the last couple of years, Pleasant View Gardens, Loudon, New Hampshire, has entered the poinsettia trial world, but they've added a twist to the standard trial: educational sessions. Throughout the fall, they offered poinsettia workshops to growers, culminating on December 1 with a final season review with Fischer's Harvey Lang and University of New Hampshire's Paul Fisher at Pleasant View's Pembroke facility. Attendees also got to peruse the 116-variety poinsettia trial as well as a shipping trial.

However, the most fun was had during a poinsettia painting/glittering demo. A couple of local growers mentioned they'd already been sprinkling and spraying poinsettias this season—and sales were good. But for most, the concept was new and heavily touted by Harvey, who tried his hand at a few color combinations with the spray bottle.

Over in the trial area, attendees were encouraged to stick flags in their favorite red, pink, white and novelty varieties.

In the red category, lots of attention went to Premium Red (Dummen), Infinity (Dummen), Freedom Fireworks (Ecke), Chianti Red (Ecke) and Prestige (Ecke).

It was difficult to discern a favorite in the whites, but we saw lots of flags in the pinks for Enduring Pink (Dummen), Nutcracker Pink (Oglevee), Premium Pink (Dummen) and Maren (Fischer).

In the novelties, Marblestar (Fischer), Premium Picasso (Dummen) and Monet Twilight (Ecke) garnered much of the praise. —Jennifer Duffield White

Shipping Trial Results

It may look good in a greenhouse, but what happens after three days in a truck? Pleasant View Gardens did their first-ever poinsettia shipping trial in 2004, giving growers a chance to see performance down the line.

Section Grower Lee Nye coordinated the trial, which involved sleeving all the poinsettias in plastic sleeves and putting them on a truck for three days to replicate the shipping process. Then they brought the plants back to the greenhouse, unsleeved them, and evaluated plants based on their initial appearance. Two days later, they graded plants again. The results, says Lee, turned out to be a bell curve.

Final calculations gave a rating of 1 to 5, with 1 being the best, 3 being typical, and 5 as the worst. There were only two top-rated plants: Prestige and Enduring Pink both had a rating of 1. However, a total of 30 varieties showed a good recovery from the shipping trial, with ratings of 2; and many more still fell into the average category. — J.D.W.

Purdue University

It was an easy drive from Chicagoland to West Lafayette, Indiana, November 30, to see the northernmost of the three “official” poinsettia trial sites, coordinated by Dr. Allen Hammer. Turnout was excellent, with growers and retailers from the surrounding states drawn to the experimental, new and existing varieties.

The first thing we noted was the number of numbered experimentals in the trial. “It’s really nice to see this many trial cultivars from the breeders,” Allen agreed. Noteworthy experimentals include six reds from Dummen, of which two—5066 and 2423—show promise, in Allen’s opinion. From Ecke, 979 is a red that Allen likes for its Prestige-like growth habit but improved bract habit—he thinks they should introduce it.

In Jingle Bell types, Oglevee showed one called Red/White Spotted and Ecke showed one called 54-99. Both are attractive, but both are also typical of the style, meaning they’re terrible at staying true to type. In fact, Allen says Ecke is naming 54-99 “Shimmer Surprise” to reflect the point that you never know what you’ll get.

Purple/burgundy has been the hot color of late, and Dummen showed a purple experimental that Allen calls “outstanding” for being easy to grow, with a good purple color—“much better than Plum Pudding,” he says.

Finally in experimentals, Ecke’s 33-03 is admittedly unusual, with its chlorotic patches and curled foliage, but Allen says consumers like it. And it has good vigor, he adds.

In new varieties (those on the market for the 2004 season), those that got the most attention from attendees were Visions of Grandeur (Ecke), Cinnamon Star (Fischer) and Premium Blush Pink (Dummen). Allen commented that Visions of Grandeur has a “classy look” Allen says, adding that its large size and tremendous vigor mean it’s not a mass-market plant.

In new reds, Christmas Star (Selecta) shows promise for its good habit; Allen adds that Selecta varieties seem to have the best cyathia of all breeders’ genetics.— Chris Beytes