

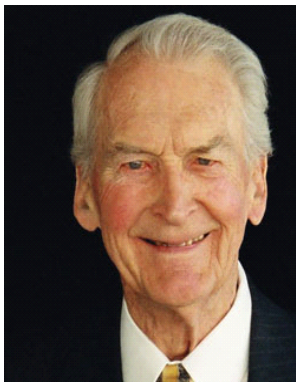
GROWERTALKS

Features

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#1 AD IN THE WORLD GUARANTEED!

Chris Beytes



For years you've seen the advertisements on the back pages of gardening magazines: Overtly in-your-face with their jumble of colors, type faces, quotes, bullet points, testimonials and italicized claims of “#1 Adversity Overcomer” and “Unchallenged \$5,000 guaranteed to be world champion,” they tout a product called SUPERthrive, from Vitamin Institute of North Hollywood, California. The product name, the Hollywood address, over-the-top styling of the ads and the colorful claims all leave the reader

shaking his or her head in bewilderment. But for millions of satisfied customers, the crazy ads yield beautiful results.



Ginny Andrews, manager at Stark Bro's Garden Center in Louisiana, Missouri, admits she doesn't like the Superthrive ads and packaging, but “we get so many people loving that stuff and coming back for more,” she says. Stark Bro's retails “\$2,000 to \$3,000 worth a year, at least” of SUPERthrive.

Ginny's not alone. While sales figures aren't available, SUPERthrive may be one of the most common, best-known garden center products in spite of—or more likely because of—the unusual ads.

The man behind SUPERthrive and the advertising campaign that has made it a garden center staple is Dr. John A. A. Thomson, a Ph.D. biochemist and nutritionist. A born salesman who as a youth was a top seller of the Saturday Evening Post in New York City, Dr. Thomson originally planned to study law. But during his undergraduate years he discovered a love of science and “life process substances” (vitamins, hormones and such), which led to an education in biochemistry and nutrition at various California schools, including USC, Cal Poly, UCLA and Columbia Pacific (where he earned his Ph.D.).

While he was in school in the 1930s, science was uncovering the mysteries of plant physiology. An article in Better Homes and Gardens on new research into vitamin B1 and hormones for plants piqued his interest. “I pitched right into it right away,” Dr. Thomson recalls, “as I could see how I could make a buck by selling the vitamin B1 in liquid form, instead of the way it was available in dry form, which was unhandy to use.” In 1940 he began bottling and selling his B1 formula and at the same time started researching plant hormones,

digging for facts and findings in research from all around the world.

The new product, called B1 Best Buy sold well, thanks to what Dr. Thomson calls the B1 fad. But he realized he needed to take the product further. “After I got started with that, I figured, well, just one vitamin isn’t all that impressive. I’d better figure out how to put together a product that will give customers more for the same price.”

He began adding the newly discovered plant hormones to the original B1 formula, and when an order for B1 came in the customer would get the new product, SUPERthrive. “They ended up by getting something that worked like nobody’s business when they were just expecting to get the B1,” he says. “It got so it had 50 ingredients in due order.” (Like the Colonel’s secret recipe, don’t bother asking what those 50 ingredients are—only one other person in the family business besides himself knows—perhaps either his daughter Patrisha or grandson Travis?)

But what about those ads? How did they come about?

First, during his formative years during the Great Depression, Dr. Thomson worked in the printing business, designing and selling print services. That gave him experience with typography and all the “gnat’s eyebrows” of print, as he puts the fine details of font use.

Second, Vitamin Institute has never had a sales force. Dr. Thomson did all the sales himself in those early years, and he was the one who heard all the testimonials from satisfied SUPERthrive customers. He decided early on that the best person to write the ads for a product is the salesman who’s selling it. As he told Ginny Andrews when she once called to both compliment the product and criticize the ads, “I’ve got so much to say about this product, I could take up more room.”

Third is what we mentioned earlier: the Great Depression. Growing up and starting into business in the 1930s gave him a great appreciation for every cent he earned. And every inch of real estate on a piece of paper, too. That’s why every ad is crammed full of the quotes, claims and comments he’s heard over the years, with nary a bit of white space. “I’m Scottish both by lineage and habit,” he explains, “and I just can’t stand to waste space.”

Don’t expect the ads, which have remained basically the same since 1940, to change just because you think they’re funny looking. Dr. Thomson isn’t concerned with his critics, although he does begrudgingly acknowledge that they exist.

“Once in a while people will say, ‘It’s too cluttered.’ They think I’m saying too much,” he says. When asked how he responds, he replies matter of factly, “I keep on selling more merchandise.”

Dr. Thomson could have retired 30 years ago, but at 97 years of age as of last month he still comes into his North Hollywood office five days a week, where he chats with customers—and curious journalists—on the phone. Over the years he has developed more than 100 vitamin products for humans and 100 for plants, but SUPERthrive was the only one that managed to “make its own way around the world without salesmen.” In fact, he earned a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Lawn & Garden Marketing and Distribution Association in 2006 for the success of SUPERthrive.

But while he’s justifiably proud of his product—and his ad campaign—don’t ask him how many bottles he’s

sold over the years. Like the secret formula, that's a number he keeps to himself. "In the first place, I have no idea," he says. "And in the second place, if I knew, I probably wouldn't say. It dawned on me right at the outset that some people might want to brag about the fact that they sell more than I do. Others would want to get into it because I sell so many. No matter which one I tell them, it wouldn't help business from my standpoint."

So remember: Next time you cringe at a SUPERthrive ad, stop and realize that you are gazing upon a horticulture icon born in the Depression and that, while not as elegant as a Nike Swoosh, is just as recognizable to horticulturists and gardeners everywhere.