

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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For Growers Only

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Despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, the California Pack Trials are still the best place for traditional seedsmen (and seedswomen, of course) to discover and explore the benefits of new genetics, from plant habit and earliness to seed quality and cutting availability.

For instance, there are still side-by-side comparisons and row trials (well, a few). You can still ask breeders about germination and vigor (it's all good). And if you want, you can pull a plant out of its pack in order to study its lateral branching habit (that is, if you can find a pack).

Now, the obviously biased retail editor on page 40 will try to convince you that everything about Pack Trials—the creative displays, the focus of the presentations by trial staff, the upscale consumer packaging, the colorful POP—is all geared toward impressing garden retailers with what they can offer to their customers. And when you consider all the evidence, she might be right.

But that's not to say Pack Trials are over for you growers. Because, after all, this stuff doesn't grow itself! It takes the knowledge, experience and talent of a capable horticulturist, carefully monitoring moisture and temperature and watching for nutrient deficiencies, to produce a high-quality finished crop. It's still critical that you get the cultural information, like feed rates and PGR recommendations, for all those hot new varieties that come from Pack Trials each year. Otherwise, retailers would have nothing to sell but rubber boots and birdseed!

So let's call it a draw: Pack Trials are for growers AND retailers. Which is why our coverage spans the distance between GrowerTalks and Green Profit, starting on both sides of the magazines and meeting in the middle. This month we'll focus on new introductions, especially those from seed; next month we'll continue that, along with a focus on marketing efforts.

The 2009 Version

The verdict for 2009? It was a good Pack Trials—not brilliant, not boring. Maybe a 7.5 out of 10. Attendance? Down, flat or up, depending who you asked.

New introductions? Decent. Not earth-shattering, but there were several groundbreakers to go along with the “sincerest form of flattery” and “coattail” intros (see page 81). And as always, there were loads of color

additions to existing series.

The mood? Upbeat. Spring was just starting in the South and the good news spread up and down the coast quickly.

The gossip? Revolved around the economy (“Are we recession-proof?”) and acquisitions (“Who will be the next to be bought or sold?”).

For our coverage, which goes to page 96 of GrowerTalks and runs from pages 40 to 52 in Green Profit, we broke the new introductions into some of the most popular categories:

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Coming Up in August

Our 2009 California Pack Trials coverage continues in our August issue, where we highlight new vegetative series, the color purple, POP and marketing programs, perennials and pot crops.

Groundbreakers

Every year there are a handful of standout introductions—those that attendees can recall after a week of seeing thousands of me-too varieties and improvements. Last year was ptilotus Joey from Benary and Calliope pelargonium from Syngenta. This year, based on conversations with trial attendees up and down the coast and our own observations, these were the most memorable introductions.

Lobularia Snow Princess (Proven Winners). The first commercial lobularia (alyssum) from cuttings, Proven Winners calls this white-flowered introduction “the next Diamond Frost, ” referring to their best-selling euphorbia that makes it into so many mixed containers. Snow Princess is full, floriferous, sterile, self-cleaning and cold- and heat-tolerant. Oh, and it smells nice, too. But be warned: it is vigorous, able to take over even the most Super of tunias with a single plant.

Euphorbia Breathless Blush (Ball FloraPlant). The first bronze-foliaged Diamond Frost-type euphorbia, Breathless Blush has pale pink bracts. It will be striking in any combination planters that would benefit from a dark-foliaged component. Its sister, Breathless White, is a white and green introduction.

Tomaccio Sweet Raisin Tomato (Hishtil). Not often would a vegetable make it into the “Groundbreaker” category, but Tomaccio has been bred not for eating fresh, but for drying into a sweet tomato “raisin” that makes a great snack or salad addition. This variety is ripe for selling at a high price with the help of some creative POP and display work—every veggie gardener will want to try it.

SunPatiens impatiens (Sakata, distributed by Ecke in North America). Not quite new, but new to open distribution, this sun-loving New Guinea-style impatiens has had three years of marketing and promotion by The Home Depot. Now any retailer can sell it, but Home Depot will still be promoting it, to the benefit of all. Jimmy Turner, head of the trials at the Dallas Arboretum, says, “If a 105-degree full-sun Texas summer can’t kill SunPatiens, I don’t know what can.”

Hybrid geranium Calliope Scarlet Fire (Syngenta). Not a striking variety on its own, its claim to fame is sister variety Dark Red, introduced last year to rave reviews. In fact, Dark Red has already become Syngenta’s best-selling vegetative variety. They say Calliope could lead to a whole new category of hybrid vegetative geraniums.

Petunia Pretty Much Picasso (Proven Winners). A Supertunia vegetative trailing petunia, Pretty Much Picasso has a unique color combination that matches its unique name—flowers are purple with chartreuse edges. It’s not something you’ll sell a million of, but it should inspire conversation in the garden center if it’s displayed prominently at the garden center.

Petunia Soleil (Selecta). This Anthony Tesselaar selection is one of the most drought-tolerant bedding plants you’ll ever encounter. Called “the petunia that lives off a glass of water,” it’s been tested in the drought conditions of Australia. The less water it gets, the better the plant looks—and it doesn’t turn yellow. It has small, purple double flowers. This also fits into our “green” category (page 95) but it’s enough of a breakthrough to warrant mention here.

New Seed Series

Color additions are fine, but it’s nice to see breeders introduce complete new series of seed-produced items—hopefully improving upon existing series. Here are some highlights:

Taishan marigold (PanAmerican Seed). Called “the bigger, better dwarf African marigold,” Taishan has been bred for shorter, thicker flower stems that PanAm says offer less stretch on the bench and less breakage in shipping. Available in Gold, Orange, Yellow and a Mixture. A Ball Exclusive.

Gomphrena Las Vegas (Benary). Named for its bright colors and heat tolerance, Las Vegas grows to 16 to 20 in. in the landscape and is suited for 4 in. pots. Finishes from seed in 11-12 weeks. Available in Pink, Purple and White. Benary suggest pairing it with Graffiti pentas.

Pansy Inspire (Benary). This new series actually consists of some improved FamX pansies along with new breeding. (The old Fama series is going away). Inspire (called Fancy in Europe) is bred for extreme heat tolerance and a compact habit. They’re positioning them against the class-leading Delta series. Nineteen colors along with Clear and Blotched mixes.

Debonair and Sophistica F1 petunia (PanAmerican Seed). These two series (actually, Debonair

is called a “collection”) were both selected for their fashionable flower colors. The Multiflora Debonair series starts with Dusty Rose and Lime Green; while the Grandiflora Sophistica series gets Antique Shades, Blue Morn and Lime Bicolor. Debonair is a Ball Exclusive.

Gomphrena Audray (American Takii). A tall series of gomphrena that works as either a garden cut (20-24 in. in the landscape) or as a greenhouse-grown cut flower (where it grows to 30-36 in.). Audray will take the hot, humid conditions of the southern US. Offer it in gallons for great summer color. Audray starts with Pink, Purple Red and Bicolor Rose (which was formerly a stand-alone variety). (Not Pictured)

Mammoth Pansy (Goldsmith). A new giant-flowered series aimed at the fall market and Majestic Giant II. It's bred to build a solid plant before putting up flowers, they say. Eleven fun colors, including Blue-ti-ful, Rocky Rose and Glamarama White.

Coleus Versa Collection (PanAmerican Seed). The versa series is aptly named: PanAm says it works in sun or shade and in premium packs, 5-in. pots or gallons (three plants per pot). Five colors: Lime, Rose to Lime, Burgundy to Green, Green Halo and Watermelon.

Mint Chocolate geranium series (Floranova). A dark-leaved seed geranium series, Mint Chocolate starts with two colors, Candy and Cherry and a Mix. Grow in high light to get more contrast between the bright flowers and the dark foliage.

Aromas Snapdragon (Goldsmith). An intermediate-height series suited for landscape and cutting-garden use. Seven flavorful colors: French Vanilla, Fresh Lemon, Magenta Mist, Orchid Bliss, Peach Breeze, Red Spice and Sweet Pink.

Big Kiss F1 gazania (Goldsmith). A sub-series to the Kiss series, Big Kiss is, as the name says, big! With big flowers and big plants, suited for big pots. It gets two colors: White Flame and Yellow Flame.

Vinca Boa series (Floranova). A trailing vinca suited for baskets. As Serpentine it was a Michell's exclusive last year. Now as Boa, it's open to all. Four colors, plus limited availability on two more colors, Burgundy and Peppermint.

Cora Cascade trailing vinca (Goldsmith). Five colors. A spreading/creeping type suited for baskets or the landscape, Cora Cascade has the same disease resistance as the original Cora series.

Durora and Kameleo Gerbera (Sakata). Durora is a mini-type for 3 ½- to 4 ½-in. pots, while Kameleo is a micro for 2 ½- to 3-½ in. pots. Sakata says Durora is fine for landscape and bedding use, while Kameleo is intended for the specialty gift market. Both are available only as mixes right now.

For the Masses

High-volume growers need varieties that are quick, uniform and easy to ship. These intros fit the bill ... but of course can be grown by anyone seeking these traits. Any of these varieties would be perfectly suitable for an independent, too.

Sierra Synchro cyclamen, Orbit Synchro geranium (Goldsmith). Synchro is a “best of the best” series selected by Goldsmith for growers who want the most uniform habit and tightest bloom window possible in a cyclamen or geranium series.

Dancer F2 geranium (Floranova). Floranova’s first F2 series in separate colors (they did have Cabaret, which is a mix). It’s good for “value” production, since F2 seed is less expensive than that of an F1 hybrid, they say. The compromise is a lack of perfect uniformity. It’s early, but still offers good garden performance. Six colors.

Sense S1 pansies. (Floranova). A “synthetic hybrid” pansy series which they explained makes it kind of like an open-pollinated variety, but with a variety high-quality parent stock. It’s another “value” series, with a cost that’s less than half of one of Floranova’s F1 series. 14 colors.

Aretes Fuchsia (Dummen). With medium-compact growth, early flowering, and both regular and upright habits, Dummen’s Aretes series is easy for the high-volume grower to produce and ship.

Potomato cherry tomato (Hishtil). Potomato is a compact cherry tomato that offers easy, eye-catching POP material, including a handy carry pack, that’s perfect for a high-volume retail setting such as a grocery store.

Multi Liners

This labor-saving trend puts three different colors or varieties into one rooted liner, taking both the guesswork and the labor out of creating and planting mixed combos and baskets. But it’s not just a matter of shoving together any old varieties; breeders carefully test the compatibility of various crops to make sure they “play well” together in the same liner and finished container. Dummen invented the idea with their Confetti liners, Selecta joined in with Trixi-Liner; this year Syngenta jumped on the bandwagon with Kwik Kombos, New Hampshire grower and Proven Winners partner Pleasant View Gardens has a new program cleverly called “Multi-Liners,” and now Dummen has upped the ante by offering Confetti unrooted, in a box, for the do-it-yourselfer. We expect more to follow.

Green Is the Word

Green and sustainable horticultural practices have the double advantage of being good for the environment as well as being good for the long-term bottom line. Whether they save you some expenses or save the planet (or both), these varieties and programs struck us as being “green.”

Ecovation program (EuroAmerican Propagators). This program groups varieties that need less feed and less water without sacrificing their beauty. Company owner John Rader said he was inspired by Australia’s need for drought-tolerant plants, and many of the plants launching with this program are Australian natives. Euro’s succulent offerings also fit into Ecovation, as well as their grasses, scaevola, calibrachoa and sutera.

Succulents (from multiple sources). Succulent plants have been gaining in popularity for several years now, following on the coattails of the ornamental grass craze. They’re durable across a range of climates, drought-resistant and offer much architectural interest.

Petunia Soleil (from Anthony Tesselaar, distributed by Selecta). This spreading vegetative petunia is extremely drought tolerant. Its slogan is, "The petunia that lives off a glass of water." Less water makes it more compact and flower earlier. In fact, the drier you keep it, the better it looks. Comes in Purple for now.

Sun Parasol Mandevilla (Suntory). For a lush-looking plant, the line of Sun Parasol mandevilla varieties require less water to initiate flowering, and take a minimum of care. For overwintering, Sun Parasol also needs little water. New varieties available include Stars & Stripes and Burgundy (Lush Crimson to be released soon).

Calandiva Kalanchoe (Fides). Fides's Calandiva series of decorative pot kalanchoes is giving "maximum color with a minimum of water," as the Fides folks said to Trials visitors. New varieties in the Calandiva series include Jolie, Gabor and Tylo.