

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Poinsettias: “Points” of Interest

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California dreamin’

For the sixth year, the Paul Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, California held its annual poinsettia trial. This event brought 175 visitors to the 23-acre facility from November 30 to December 4. More than 80 different Ecke varieties were on display, along with a number of plants from other breeding companies for the comparative trials. Andy Higgins says it’s the last full poinsettia trial on the West Coast.

The first thing you notice when you turn into the drive heading toward the main office is the lone poinsettia bush nestled conspicuously next to the white fence. Called St. Louis, it’s the last remaining poinsettia from a field that used to be filled with these plants. This variety dates back before the 1960s, making it one of the oldest

poinsettias on the Ranch. Talk about old school!

We also saw a collection of Dulce Rosa-like euphorbias that Ecke is planning to roll out for 2011. There were three experimentals on display in bold colors and bracts that split to create fully double flowers. Ecke is hoping this opens the door to multi-season sales during different times of the year.

With regard to marketing, the company is working toward more of an emphasis on building specific programs to help retailers differentiate themselves from the big box stores, says Marketing Manager Snow Maestas. Ecke’s Design Center offers growers and retailers clever, trendy solutions for dressing up poinsettias to make them look extra special on the shelf. And the cause marketing behind the Polar Bear poinsettia was developed to benefit growers and the endangered Arctic bears that will be helped from the donations Ecke makes for each cutting purchased. (During our tour, Chris even joined Snow for a poinsettia “snack,” taking a big bite of a leaf while being captured on video, to prove that poinsettias are NOT poisonous.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-J6lVavLDs)

Along with existing series, Ecke showed two new introductions for 2010: Tapestry and Solstice Red. Tapestry is an upgrade to Holly Point and is a mid-season variety. Andy says it provides a variegated plant with modern, grower-friendly and consumer-friendly genetics.

Solstice Red is being marketed as a late-season, vigorous red that's ideal for growers looking for fresh plants for churches, fundraisers and end-of-the-season sales.

While we were in San Diego County, we made it a point to squeeze in some greenhouse visits. Not many of the San Diego-area growers do poinsettias; for instance, at Sunlet Nursery, John and Janet Kister focus instead on cyclamen (gorgeous specimens!) and Christmas cactus. But we did see nice crops at Progressive Growers and, believe it or not, Plug Connection.

Progressive's Dave Forester says they sell primarily to independents and landscapers from their 13-acre nursery. Landscape customers include big resort and golf course operations in Palm Springs, plus Sea World, and even homeowner associations that plant the entrances to their neighborhoods.

Interestingly, about half of their poinsettia crop goes into the landscape. They grow about 10,000 4 in. (\$3.50 wholesale) and 6,000 6 in. (\$6.15 wholesale), plus some other sizes up to 14 in. Variety for the 4 in. is Red Elf (which replaced Pepride); for 6 in. they like Early Prestige, Prestige and Independence. Mix is a very conservative 95% red.

Plug Connection got into poinsettias back in 1995 by contract-growing finished plants for a customer. They fit nicely into the plug schedule, says Juan St. Amant, Plug Connection's head of new product development, so they kept up the program, now growing for a mix of customers, including supermarkets such as Kroger, independent garden centers and fundraisers. Key red varieties include Prestige and Premium; they do a mix of novelties, including Orange Spice, Cortez Burgundy and Ice Punch.

North Carolina Bound

Our widely traveled colleague Dr. Marvin Miller, market research director for Ball Horticultural, went to the Tar Heel State for the first of the National Poinsettia Trials at North Carolina State University and retailer Homewood Nursery, owned by Joe Stoffregan. He also stopped at Mitchell's Nursery & Greenhouse in King for a look at owner Judy Mitchell's trial.

NC State Professor John Dole called the reaction to the university trial "excellent. The growers in North Carolina were well represented at the grower open houses—we even had a first-time poinsettia grower attend, which was the first one in a couple of years." More than 400 attendees viewed the 93 cultivars on display, making it the highest turnout in the trial's history.

All of the trial sites were open to consumers for a day, and visitors could vote for their favorite varieties. It was interesting that voting for both the Homewood and Mitchell's trials leaned toward non-red varieties. Out of 125 voters from the Mitchell's trial, HC-18B (the Dulce Rosa-type variety), Shimmer Surprise and Ice Punch—all from Ecke—were the top three vote getters.

The overall results of the NC State consumer poll also showed non-red poinsettias as the favorites, but Professor Dole said that the most important list to look at are which reds they liked the best. "The 'overall favorite' list is misleading in that while many people enjoy and vote for various non-red cultivars, they will ultimately buy red ones."

The Homewood Nursery poll also had similar results. Ice Punch received more than 300 votes out of 802 ballots as the favorite among visitors, while 39-02B (a Jingle Bell-type experimental from Ecke) and HC-18B finished second and third, respectively.

Deep Down in Florida

The trials at the University of Florida in Gainesville were decidedly more upbeat this year compared with the year before, reports Dr. Jim Barrett. Some 800 broker and distributor reps, growers, retailers and end consumers visited the trials to see the 140 different existing and experimental cultivars, giving their attendance totals a major boost.

“There was more interest in variety performance this year due to some of the changes occurring with the breeder companies, like the need for reds with [novelty] colors to match, and the increased interest in earlier finishing varieties,” Jim says.

UF’s consumer open house is called the Poinsettia Show and Sale, which brings interested gardeners and poinsettia lovers from all over the state. Horticulture students grew and sold more than 2,500 plants to raise money for an international trip set for early May, where they learn about production, gardens, natural areas and urban landscaping in that country.

While the consumers were admiring the plants, Dr. Barrett and his students asked them to pick their favorites. The varieties that drew the most interest were Ice Punch, Orange Spice (“Because it’s Gator orange,” he explains), Ruby Frost, Ice Crystal and 39-02B.

Says Jim: “Individuals who attend are interested in finding two things: new and unique varieties, and high-quality plants.”

Up in Indiana

On December 4, the editors met up with Marvin to visit the campus of Purdue University in West Lafayette. Trials coordinator Dr. Roberto Lopez and his team had more than 90 varieties on display, along with a few different studies on Topflor PGR early drench treatments, cold finishing and a sustainable production test featuring various biopots fertilized with Daniels plant food.

“The growers that came really enjoyed it,” says Dr. Lopez. “I think the one thing they really liked were the research experiments throughout the greenhouse. That was something they hadn’t seen in years past; this is only the second year we did them.”

Among the sea of poinsettias, there were many new introductions on hand, including Syngenta’s Mira Red and Ruby Frost. Chris chatted with Harvey Lang from Syngenta, who said that Mira Red is positioned against Ecke’s Early Prestige and Dümme’s Premium series. It features dark green, oak-shaped foliage and a compact to medium growth habit. Harvey also said that it can be grown cool, too.

Ruby Frost has been getting some attention for its novel bract color and heavily cut, medium-green foliage. It’s an early- to mid-season bloomer and the bract color changes depending on the light levels of your climate. Along with a half dozen numbered experimentals, Dümme showed its newest novelty, Premium Ice Crystal. It features bracts with red edges and white centers, giving it a flecked, spray-painted appearance.

Selecta had five 2010 new introductions in the trial, including three Christmas Feelings colors: Dark Salmon, Red Cinnamon and Cinnamon Evol. Christmas Feelings is Selecta's number one series worldwide; it's a mid-season, dark green series with low to medium vigor that's easy to control.

Besides the main poinsettia trial, the biopot trial was really interesting. We can say for certain that the OP47 pots seemed to perform just like plastic (meaning clean and tidy and easy to retail), while the containers made from cow manure were slimy and hard to handle.

More than 100 growers, breeders and industry professionals walked through the greenhouses, while during the consumer open house, Dr. Lopez said they saw 350 visitors. His consumer survey also showed that they leaned toward the novelty varieties—Ice Punch, Orange Spice and Sonora White Glitter (Syngenta) finished in the top three. The favorite red was Classic Red, but the growers liked Solstice Red because there are few late-season cultivars in this color category.

After the Purdue trial, we headed South for a quick visit to Heartland Growers. Jim Gapinski and his son, Nick, took us through their facility, where we saw a lot of empty space where thousand of poinsettia plants used to be. Their main reds this season included Orion from Syngenta, and Dümme's EarlyGlory and EuroGlory.

Jim used the word "good" quite a lot to describe their season: "The season was good. Quality was good. Weather was good. Sales were good. And we're done before it gets cold. Overall, it was a good season," he said.

After our travels from one coast to the other, we were reminded that no two trials are the same. That pink poinsettia you saw on Monday may not look the same at a different trial in a different part of the country on Friday.

To really get a complete picture of how a specific poinsettia grows, you have to visit multiple trial locations, says Marvin. "You can't go to one trial and think you know what a variety looks like. Unless you go to four or five, you don't really know what you're looking at. Especially when you're dealing with new varieties; you may not know the idiosyncrasies (inherent genetics) of growing them. You may be growing them all the same way when not every poinsettia is created equal." **GT**