

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Raker's Acres

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It's not the biggest in acreage or number of varieties, but it may be North America's largest when it comes to good old-fashioned side-by-side comparisons. It's the Trial Gardens at C. Raker & Sons, Litchfield, Michigan.

A few statistics to support the claim:

- Almost 2,500 varieties
- More than 50,000 plugs/liners
- 600 rows of comparison trials
- 210 sponsored row trials
- 82 rows of echinacea and grasses to overwinter
- 37 All-America Selections trial plantings
- 16 raised sponsor beds
- 226 14-in. calibrachoa hanging baskets
- 265 20-in. new variety planters
- 56 14-in. new variety hanging baskets

And a whole lot more, including perennial theme plantings, Great Lakes natives, a display of Hort Couture (of which Raker's is a partner), sweet potato comparisons, green roofs, and even a comparison of mint plants.

Even if it's not the biggest, "It's certainly one of the best," said the obviously biased Gerry Raker with a smile as he donned his marketing hat. "There's no reason to go anywhere else."

This is the seventh year Raker has participated in the Michigan Garden Plant Tour (<http://planttour.hrt.msu.edu/>). Gerry explained that they build the extensive grounds to lure customers to off-the-beaten-path Litchfield, Michigan, rather than spending the money to travel. "We made it a mission to make Raker a destination."

It took a few years and a few ideas (remember Raker U?), but now all the distribution companies come, along with growers and retailers from throughout the Midwest. (They're still working on luring the big box buyers.)

They're shooting for 2,000 visitors from early July through the end of August.

Standouts include lobelias, which were doing very well in spite of the heat. "There are a lot of good ones," said Trial Manager Lori May. "When [the breeders] said they were breeding for heat tolerance, they meant it."

Another standout they noted was Gryphon begonia. PanAmerican Seed promotes it for part sun or shade, but they have one pot of it in full sun. "I'm amazed at how well that one is doing," Lori says.

If you missed it, you can still glean all the details on their website. They actually photographed every variety numerous times during the summer, so you can see how they fared through the season.

<http://trialgardens.raker.com> **GT**