

GROWERTALKS

Features

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More From Michigan

Chris Beytes



Zylstra Greenhouses/Tuinier Bros., Kalamazoo

Right on fabled Market Street in Kalamazoo, this trial features mostly vegetative varieties by Ball FloraPlant, Selecta, Danziger and GroLink, along with select seed items from PanAmerican Seed and Burpee Home Gardens. The variety selection is based on what Zylstra and Tuinier each grow; Zylstra grows plugs, liners and finished, while next-door neighbor Tuinier is a rooting station and grows finished, too.

“Just to be in the business as a young plant producer, it’s really important that you’re taking advantage of all the marketing opportunities that you have,” explains owner Steve Zylstra. “That’s the main reason we do the garden tour, to keep our name out in the market as a viable producer.”

This is their third year in the Garden Plant Tour. They use the trial not only to show off what they do, but also to make their own product decisions. Sizes include 14-in. terracotta pots and 12-in. hanging baskets—about 900 containers total. They expected about 500 visitors.

Highlights this year include a line of about 30 varieties of tropicals and foliage from tissue culture (from Agri-Starts and AG3 in Florida); the full selection of Selecta’s TrixiLiner mixed baskets; and a few individual varieties, including Selecta’s Zion osteospermums, Gryphon begonia from PanAmerican Seed, the new Bonfire begonia colors (Selecta), new Wave petunia colors (PanAmerican Seed), and bidens Charm Yellow from Danziger.

C. Raker & Sons, Litchfield

At Raker, it's all about variety—2,429, give or take, from more than 30 breeders. A whopping 600-plus rows of side-by-side comparisons make this the largest comparison trial in North America. Add to that 226 calibrachoa baskets, 265 20-in. pots of new varieties, AAS comparisons, 16 spectacular sponsor beds, a big display of Hort Couture (of which Raker is now part owner) and more, and you've got a day-long visit.



Gerry Raker explained that they built the extensive grounds to lure customers to off-the-beaten-path Litchfield, rather than spending the money for their staff to travel. "We made it a mission to make Raker a destination." In that, they've definitely succeeded; they expected 2,000 visitors in July and August.

Standouts included 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."

Gryphon begonia stood out here, too, because it was doing well in a full-sun pot. PanAmerican Seed promotes it for part sun or shade. "I'm amazed at how well that one is doing," Lori said.

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>.

Michigan State University, East Lansing

We timed our visit to MSU to coincide with their annual Garden Plant Showcase, where representatives of leading breeding companies talked about their newest introductions. About 70 local growers and retailers, along with some garden enthusiasts, attended.



This trial is grown in a garden setting rather than rows. New trial manager Katie McCarver (pictured with Solenia begonia) did a good job in the unfamiliar setting under the tutelage of grounds manager Dan Bulkowski.

Katie presented her Top 16 trial standouts to the audience. They are: Patchwork impatiens (Ball FloraPlant); acalypha Island Sunrise (Plug Connection); cleome Senorita Rosalita (Proven Winners); caryx Amazon Mist (Kieft); angelonia Angel Face Blue Improved (Proven Winners); gaillardia Arizona Red Shades (Benary); ipomoea Sweet Caroline (Proven Winners); ageratum True Blue (Grimes); petunia Ray Purple and Ray White (Danziger); SunPatiens Compact Lilac (Sakata); petunia Black Velvet (Ball FloraPlant); petunia Surprise Mandarin Twist (Dümmen); regal geranium Graziosa Cherry Picotee (Dümmen); begonia Solenia Salmon Coral (Ecke); and petunia SuperCal Neon Rose (Sakata).



Four Star Greenhouses, Carleton

Way over near Detroit is where you find Four Star Greenhouses, one of the three Proven Winners partners. Which means the trial is heavily Proven Winners genetics, along with Proven Selections and other stuff that Four Star provides to their regional customers. The setting is beautiful, with covered pergolas for hanging baskets, a winding path and stream for in-ground plantings, plus a covered seminar/dining pavilion. This is definitely not a quickie two-week deal for Four Star.

Owner Tom Smith explained that their goal is to show off their varieties' container and landscape performance using no maintenance beyond what a good gardener would give. However, this is not a drought survival test. Everything is watered with drip lines and gets appropriate water and feed.

So the trial looked great.

A popular topic at several trials was mini petunias. Danziger's Little tunias were mentioned several times as good alternatives to calibrachoa for growers who have trouble with pH. Proven Winners' Supertunia Charms also fit that bill.

For fun, we asked Tom, "If you fell out of a FedEx plane (think "Castaway") and landed on a deserted island with a box of plants, what one variety would you want it to contain, with which you could landscape your hut?" His answer: Of existing varieties, petunia Vista Pink Bubblegum. "It's a no-brainer," he says. "It takes heat, humidity, low light, dry ..." And of the new introductions, his favorite is mecardonia Golddust (pictured), which makes a tidy little mat in the landscape or mound in containers.

Mast Young Plants

Formerly known as Glass Corner Greenhouses, the impressive glass greenhouse is STILL on the corner (not that they would have moved it).

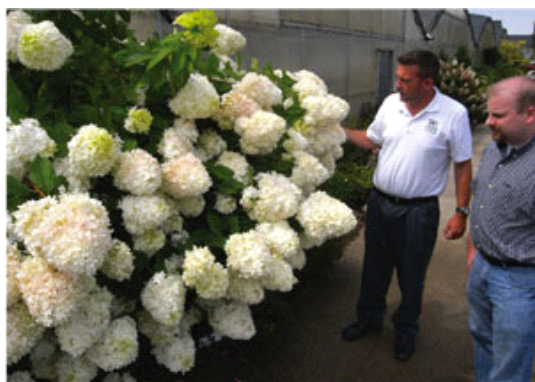
We were greeted by a wicked downpour, and then by Joyce Mast (who has since left) and Brian Weesies, who explained that their trial is a "living catalog" of their young plants. It's primarily vegetative varieties, but they also trial some key seed products that customers ask for, such as Wave petunia, Dragon Wing begonia and Tiger Eye rudbeckia.



It's another Michigan trial that's completely independent, with no sponsors. It features loads of containers and baskets, plus raised beds, all in an interesting enclosed garden site next to the greenhouse ... that happens to sit under high voltage transmission lines (we didn't note any strange growth patterns emerging from the ions in the air).

According to Brian, who grew the trial, one of his standouts is Sakata's SunPatiens, which he says are easily programmable and look great all the time. Other standouts include various dahlias they trialed, including the Hypnotica series by Fides. Gryphon begonia from PanAmerican Seed, which they called "fabulous," is

another notable introduction.



Spring Meadow Nursery

This was the first year on the tour for woody plant producer and Proven Winners supplier Spring Meadow. They didn't do anything fancy—just took folks on a walking tour of the display gardens planted around their office. It's a good way to see their offerings. Next year they may spring for a fancy tent and grill some burgers. Despite the modest start, they gave five or six tours a day.

And how do the annual folks react? “We’re in the nursery world,” replied Alex Buckallew. “The greenhouse world is intrigued with us.”

Alex and Ryan McGrath showed us some of their offerings, which currently lean heavily toward hydrangeas, buddleias, hibiscus and roses. Noteworthy varieties include Invincibelle Spirit, the first colored Annabelle-type hydrangea (it's pink); buddleia Miss Molly (compact red); hydrangea Quick Fire, the earliest to bloom (early June); and the Home Run series of roses, which competes with Knockout. Oh, that impressive hydrangea the guys are showing off is Limelight.

Something else they showed us: The world's only TTA video/computer sorter for shrub liners. Amazing ... and big! It shows that Spring Meadow is serious about quality and uniformity.

Art's favorite annual

During the Michigan Garden Plant Tour, We had the pleasure of dining at the home of MSU professor Art Cameron and his wife, Marlene. He's got a great little place right on the lake, with wonderful flower and vegetable gardens completely surrounding the house. The gardens were as colorful and quirky as Art.

While Art is a known perennial fanatic, one of the plants he was quick to show off was an 8-ft. tall annual nicotiana—and not our ornamental nicotiana, either, but real tobacco, bred to roll into stogies. The plants came from a friend who sources the seed online. They were spectacular, and had pretty pink flowers up high.





Pell Greenhouses

Pell primarily grows the Green Fuse line of vegetative products (formerly Bodger Botanicals). Craig Stevens of Henry F. Michell, which distributes for Green Fuse, was on hand to show us around. Craig is a long-time Zeeland, Michigan, plantsman, whose brother owns a greenhouse, so he was an excellent source of info on what his customers are looking for.

One thing we have to say about Pell is how attractive their trial area is. It's alongside the greenhouses, and the Pells have constructed some very nice lattice fencing and trellises.

But back to the plants: Craig's favorites include begonia Beaucoup, which he says are nicely mounded, and very pliable for easy shipping. (One key: avoid high salts). Angelonia Actor series looked good, too, as did the Blanket series of spreading petunia. Snapdragon Acrobat, a trailing snap, also stood out as it was still in bloom despite the heat of July and August.

Walters Gardens

Last stop of the trip was Walters Gardens, where Director of Marketing Susan Martin took us through the perennials. Like Spring Meadow, Walters used permanent flower gardens to show off their varieties rather than temporary displays (the advantages of being woody or perennial growers rather than annual growers).

There are scores of great perennial introductions (119, they say) but here are four that are especially noteworthy: Hosta American Hero raises money for "Greencare for Troops," a Project Evergreen initiative that helps provide volunteers to do lawn and landscape chores for soldiers serving our country—a great cause! (In fact, check out this great video featuring the very funny Mike Rowe of "Dirty Jobs" fame.

www.projectevergreen.com/gcft/)



American Hero is a tough plant, with heavy, dark green and cream foliage. Phlox Shockwave is a variegated sport of David's Lavender that's said to be very stable. And coreopsis Galaxy and Cosmic Eye are part of the Big Bang series hybridized by Darrell Probst. Cosmic Eye was a big hit at the recent Perennial Plant Association conference, said Susan. **GT**