

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

6/23/2011

### Oglesby's Perennial Potential

Joli A. Hohenstein



*(Left to right) Gary Hennen, president, Mary Oglesby McKenzie, secretary/treasurer, and David Oglesby, vice president of Oglesby Plants International.*

---

It's a well-known fact that traditional foliage growers are always on the hunt for something new, and that's what Oglesby Plants International is banking on with their new perennial program.

"There are a lot of really talented people focusing on the outside and tropicals," says Gary Hennen, president. "We want to help them keep their greenhouses full and profitable."

That may not sound too wild on the surface, but it's quite the departure for Oglesby, an Altha, Florida-based tissue culture and young plant producer and breeder known for their unique foliage plants. And quite the learning curve, though it's a road that's paying off.

"We've been quite busy," says Gary. "In addition to being the only domestic lab licensed to produce Terra Nova Nurseries varieties, we've been licensed by Itsaul Plants. We're working with people like PlantHaven, and we're doing contract work for Athens Select propagators. Plus, we're introducing our own plants like euphorbia and mandevilla."

#### The path to perennials

Certainly all of the activity with perennial plants didn't happen overnight. It's been two years of careful projecting, sampling, trialing and analyzing. So how did they get here, and what made one of the country's premier foliage companies look twice at perennials?

"This is nothing new—we're always looking for new products," Gary says. "The difference is we're finding new perennials and ornamental grasses in addition to foliage plants."

They started with heuchera because of its beautiful, colorful foliage, seeing it as an excellent candidate for

crossover as garden or patio plants. Plants are available as Stage 3 lab material and small liners such as 162 and 200 cell trays, all weaned and ready to transplant.

The first things Oglesby had to figure out: Can you grow it in Florida? (Yes, quite well.) Would Florida growers produce it? (Sampling shows that yes, they see it as a viable option.)

“Kraft Gardens was looking for product we could sell to existing customers, that we could grow outside, and that would not be influenced by cold weather,” says Kevin Kraft, president and owner of the Ft. Pierce, Florida, foliage operation.

To start the program, Oglesby began sampling plants both in-house and sending samples to growers across the state.

“I asked some of our better customers, who said they have trouble getting nice, full product at the beginning of spring,” says Kevin, who trialed 7,000 pots and 30 genera for Oglesby this spring.

Extensive testing and trialing there and at other locations has revealed hundreds of options, with many more potential varieties and plants coming down the pipe.

“Our thought is that growers can bring plants on in Florida and address the high-end, quality-conscious independent garden center,” Gary explains. “You hit them early; hit the spring market early, and fill up those benches with beautiful plants. A lot of heuchera have beautiful fall foliage, so you can address that market, too.”

A few favorite heucheras for Florida production so far: Cherry Sorbet, Chocolate Ruffles, Cinnabar Silver, Obsidian and Pink Lipstick. Hundreds of other candidates stand on the horizon.

---

## Inside Oglesby

With \$300 and 7 acres, Raymond P. Oglesby started Oglesby Nursery, Inc. in Hollywood, Florida. It was 1947, and he saw potential in supplying junipers and other ornamentals to landscapers.

As the business grew, he moved to Altha, Florida, then in 1975 added a tissue culture lab and shortly after, a state-of-the-art young plant facility with misting and fogging systems.

The propagation side of the business expanded significantly in 1984 with a new lab, and worldwide propagation contracts soon followed.

More lab and greenhouse expansion in 1994 further ramped up liner production, and another addition in 2004 brought greenhouse space to its current 150,000 sq. ft.

Today Ray's children David Oglesby, vice president, and Mary Oglesby McKenzie, secretary/treasurer, along with partner Gary Hennen, president, operate the business as Oglesby Plants International.

## Having the technology

Having so many options doesn't faze Gary. In fact, quite the opposite. "Maybe the biggest surprise is that we can do this," he says. "We fell right into the system with the technology and people to pull it off."

That's not to say it hasn't been hard work, but Oglesby has been able to do it with existing staff levels, greenhouses and equipment. "We've had to adjust the environmental computer to allow more light or less light accordingly," says Gary. "But those are things we're always doing."

The company operates in three arms with their own in-house tissue culture laboratory. They were the first to offer contract tissue culture to nurseries and built the first structure in the U.S. dedicated to tissue culture.

They run a dedicated breeding and plant development operation that has so far produced nearly 60 patented varieties, including *Spathiphyllum Sensation*, a standard in interiorscapes everywhere.

And they maintain 150,000 sq. ft. of greenhouse space where they convert microcuttings to Stage 4 young plants.

Helping manage costs and going toward sustainability, the company added a new energy-efficient boiler last year, and they have a solar water heating system in the lab. Features like these have helped along the way as Oglesby developed techniques and protocols for perennial production in the Florida heat and humidity.

"Ornamental grasses are okay with the heat," Gary says, "but some of the perennials don't like it, so we've had to be selective when planting and cropping. We don't want to be doing too much in July and August."

## Potential for progress

That's where their multi-pronged approach comes in handy, leaving Oglesby lots of potential for expanding to other areas, like biofuel crops. In fact, the expansion to perennials has led them to new avenues for grasses, such as supplying *Miscanthus giganteus* to a group that's building biofuel facilities.

And, of course, they're still maintaining their edge in the foliage world. Oglesby's *Schefflera Amate Soleil* took TPIE's Most Unusual Plant Specimen award, and they've introduced dozens of new *spathiphyllum*, *alocasia*, *anthurium*, *syngonium* and *adenium* varieties so far this year.

"We're not leaving foliage—that's not in the cards," says Gary. "But we see a lot of opportunity in perennials for us and our customers to hit the market early with well-produced Florida-grown plants."

They also see a distinct benefit to supplying plants of their quality level from their location. "We're maintaining our same high-quality standards. With good production close to major markets, especially in the Southeast and Northeast, it's going to be a great advantage with FOB points for our customers," says Gary.

Seeing the potential, Oglesby is focused on broadening horizons for both themselves and their customers. "We're focused on developing markets for perennials and ornamentals. By aligning ourselves with some of

the best breeders in the business, we're positioning ourselves for growth," he says. "The tropicals business may have slowed down, but we're not interested in slowing down."

Growers like Kevin Kraft see the possibilities in perennials, too. "With this concept we could produce better, bigger, fuller, nicer product sooner for customers to be ahead of the market," he says. "A Florida grower could have that material a week or two earlier to get people really excited about spring."

With that in mind, soon Oglesby's new perennials program will expand beyond heuchera, as they're looking at crops like echinacea for the future. Wherever the road takes them, they're open to possibilities.

"Oglesby is well positioned to do almost anything in plant propagation because we have the beautiful combination of the laboratory and young plants," says Gary. "We're not finished; we've just touched the surface on perennials." **GT**

---

*Joli A. Hohenstein is marketing and PR specialist for Pen & Petal, Inc., a marketing, advertising and public relations agency for the green industry.*