

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

9/25/2013

Harrison on Hydrangeas

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Harrison Higaki, owner of Bay City Flower Company, Half Moon Bay, California, shows off one of his newest hydrangea offerings, "Vintage Harvest." The classy, multi-hued plants bring premium prices at retail (more on these in a moment).

Bay City has long been a top provider of finished hydrangeas to the florist and supermarket trade through their highly regarded "hana bay flowers" brand. But they've also long been a provider of dormant hydrangeas to growers

nationwide for forcing (this editor used to purchase Bay City's dormant hydrangeas each spring for finishing at his Florida greenhouse back in the '80s).

Back then, there were only three popular commercial varieties to choose from: Rose Supreme, Merritt Supreme and Mathilda Gutges. The hydrangea category, although steady, was stale and flat, says Harrison. But it's been making a comeback, thanks to new breeding and the popularity of landscape hydrangeas.

Says Harrison, "In Europe, there's been a real resurgence of hydrangeas. And here, as well. I think Martha Stewart did a lot for hydrangeas. Now we have new varieties that are much more attractive and have much more longevity."

The selling season for hydrangeas is expanding, too. For instance, Bay City has introduced a new variety called White Robe that they offer for Christmas forcing. "It's an opportunity to have a product that sells at Christmas with a prospect of a margin," Harrison says, subtly referencing poinsettias.

As for the Vintage Harvest hydrangeas in the photo? Harrison revealed the secret to their amazing color: 22 weeks on the bench instead of the usual 10 to 12 weeks. He learned the trick from European cut flower growers. As the flowers mature, they acquire this attractive patina. The finished plants still give the consumers

four to six weeks of enjoyment, and retailers can sell them for 50% to 60% more than ordinary hydrangeas.

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