

GROWERTALKS

Culture Notes

2/1/2018

Perennials: The Retail Color Bridge

Greg Soles



Veronica Moody Blues, taken in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, June 2016.



Veronica Moody Blues, taken in January 2016 in Homestead, Florida.

At retail, almost every year follows a pattern: Shoppers come out of the winter smiling at the happy faces on pansies, then enjoy the fragrance of snapdragons for their gardens. Petunias follow into line next as the weather warms, then gardeners enjoy impatiens, begonias and marigolds. The spring season ends with geranium half-off sales in mid-June.

What's wrong with this picture? We've pretty much trained our customers that gardening is finished once spring is planted and to come back for garden mums in September.

However, even with this pattern, I can't name one retailer or wholesale grower who wouldn't want to expand sales. How can it be done?

There's good news: New breeding affords new opportunities. Look to perennials as the perfect bridge from half-off geraniums to kids' back-to-school.

Habits are hard to break

As grower-producers, we have ways of doing things that make this difficult task called "growing" somewhat successful. We follow patterns that are time tested and we're comfortable with what we know. Changing the ways we grow a plant can seem life-threatening.

Perennial growers typically plant most perennials in the fall and overwinter them so they explode with color in the spring and early summer. If they don't sell in the spring and early summer, we cut them back and try to catch late June sales before the heat of summer. If they don't sell in this retail window, we cut them back again and sell in the fall.

The plants are very tired and don't present very well. As a result, we offer them at half off to try to get something out of our investment. By now, we've lost a pretty good percentage of what we planted over the winter and have added more labor to our cost by cutting them back.

Excitement at retail

After three years of trialing, Darwin Perennials has proven how new genetics can break the existing nursery model

and turn our outdoor production space over and over again from spring and into fall. This is creating exciting opportunities at retail for the consumer. The flower forms and textures that perennials offer the consumer are a welcome alternative once annual season begins to wind down.

We first started experimenting with Veronica Moody Blues to discover what range of production options might exist. The Moody Blues series was trialed at the University of Minnesota for hardiness and suggested we label the series a Zone 4 perennial. This showed us we have a Zone 4 to 9 perennial that's not daylength obligate—it repeat-flowers in gardens.

So, why can't we produce it fresh for retail spring, summer and fall? The answer is: WE CAN!

The last three summers we've been very busy in West Grove, Pennsylvania, experimenting with many of our new introductions, looking for new opportunities to excite retail shelves in not only spring, but summer and into fall. We've now put 59 varieties of perennials through this program. We've turned crops of agastache, achillea, coreopsis, penstemon and salvia over and over in the summer months. We flowered 15 fresh perennials for Week 35 in 2017.

We've learned that crop times are significantly reduced on these new cultivars, increasing profit. This shoulder business will increase sales at every level of the industry: liner producer, sales rep, wholesale grower and retailer. It will reduce the need to sell at reduced margins.

We can now grow many new perennials to specific sales windows—like annuals ... that are hardy. To learn more, follow along with our trials and recommendations online through our blog at www.darwinperennials.com. **GT**

Greg Soles is a product representative for Darwin Perennials, stationed in West Grove, Pennsylvania. He oversees trials and technical support for licensees, customers, sales team and product development.