

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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The Joys & Sorrows of Trialing

Heather Hydoski

Our industry is filled with beautiful gardens dedicated to plant trialing. Universities, arboretums, private companies, nonprofits and numerous growers have extensive trial areas and resources dedicated to the selection process. Votes are collected, tallied, winners named and sometimes a star is born. The end result of trialing, the garden experience, is the result of years of planning, selecting, discarding, and finally, introducing.

Trialing is an interesting, exciting, sometimes frustrating, and very crucial part of the production process. How else will we know what series or plants work for our markets? We have to be able to tell our customers that we've evaluated all series options and chosen the best.

We also need to make certain that we have the needed facilities to propagate or finish a plant. Viewing a spectacularly grown plant at someone else's trials provides no indication of what it actually took to finish. There are many site-specific variables, including temperature, light levels, daylength, pinches, chemical applications ... just to name a few.

Once a trial plant makes it through production, the final phase is often in a trial garden for in-ground evaluation. At Armstrong, we have two trial garden areas—one on the coast and one in the desert to take advantage of our dissimilar climates. Our coastal trials have yielded some very interesting results, like us being able to finish dahlias for late March without lighting. This was once thought to be impossible.

Our other trial area is the desert, which we dubbed "The Toast Test," claiming if a plant can survive that trial, it is truly made for the desert. The oddest result from that trial area was a heliotrope that looked fantastic in full sun throughout most of the summer.

Spring is the main trialing season, with breeder packages landing along with regular comparison trialing. Each season, we like to pick several items for comparison trialing against our current selections. Sometimes we remain satisfied that we're growing the best selection for our market; other times we see a series outperform what we've been using and make a switch.

Switching a vegetative nemesia series hardly causes anyone to bat an eye; switching a lantana line can cause mass customer confusion. This is why letting our customers know and understand our trialing processes is so important. Our customers need to know that we take trialing seriously, understand their market's needs and that we're committed to finding the best solutions for retail and landscape.

This part of the trialing process has improved greatly over the years; however, there is a dark side to trialing. This is the part growers don't like to speak of. This is "The Lost Trial." The Lost Trial is when the items land, go all the way

through the production process and out the door without anyone noticing. Or, rather, no one notices until a product representative asks to see the trials while a few desperate calls around the site make it apparent that the trial is MIA. (I would like to think we can all relate to the lost trials dilemma and the guilt that accompanies it.) Having an end place or use for trial items is very helpful, keeping them on-site for evaluation, and that place is the trial garden.

This spring, we had a very successful trialing process with our supplier-partner Ball Horticultural Company. We value and work with all breeders, but Ball has done a fantastic job making trialing easy, interesting and exciting for the grower. Ball is always very inclusive in their selection process, allowing us to view breeding up to several years before an item is released, which does help when the trial packages start arriving.

Our Ball trial packages landed in January, timed to finish at the same time as the California Spring Trials (CAST). We toured CAST with fellow growers, retailers and marketing people, capturing what caught the most interest. We'd already seen many of the items previously when the breeders were still making final selections and understood what made these items better or different.

The week after CAST I was able to walk into one of our greenhouses and see the entire lineup of new Selecta Dahlias, budded and almost retail-ready. In the field, standout introductions like Ball's Petunia Midnight Gold and Calibrachoa Cabaret Good Night Kisses were finishing also. This timely finishing allowed us to evaluate the crops and then sell them as early introductions to some very excited garden centers.

The entire process—from initial viewing to selecting, trialing and finally introducing—was very well done. I'm excited for our customers that get to offer and talk about the new introductions to their customers (the gardeners!) and to watch our trial gardens flourish this summer. **GT**

Heather Hydoski is the Production Manager for Armstrong Growers in Fallbrook, California.