

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Ellepot at Retail? These Growers Say Yes!

Chris Beytes



Foliage in Ellepots

Houseplants are still hot—so hot, in fact, that foliage growers may not feel much need to explore new production techniques. Not Michael Taylor and Fabiano Goncalves, owners of The Green Machine Inc., in Winter Garden, Florida. The business partners, who bought the foliage nursery two years ago, are in the process of switching most of their 200,000 sq. ft. of production into paper Ellepots and Blackmore Air Trays.

The Green Machine grows a range of bread-and-butter tropicals, from pothos and philodendron to croton and dracaena, all of which are going into 40mm, 80mm or 120mm Ellepots. The latter are manufactured in-house; the 40mm come from nearby Knox Nursery, a long-time Ellepot user.

Pictured: Pothos in 120mm Ellepot. Great roots!

For background, Ellepots are a Danish product that's like a giant cigarette stuffed with soil instead of tobacco, then sliced into liner-sized units and placed into trays. There's a wide range of paper and diameters available for practically any crop. Blackmore's Air Trays are designed to work with Ellepots to maximize air flow around the root zone, optimizing root air pruning and helping to simulate natural root development via "pinch points" that help prevent the roots from growing in a circle.

It's this improved rooting that attracted Michael and Fabiano to the Ellepot/Air Tray technology.

"Most people aren't concerned about root architecture," Michael says. "I lived in the forestry world for a long time, and my business partner is a citrus guy from Brazil, so root architecture is important to us. I think [Ellepots and Air Trays] translate into a better plant. If you can put more roots under the plant, they respond better to water and fertilizer and they are just healthier."

Benefits-wise, Michaels says, "We're seeing a huge uptick in overall quality. You know, a lot of the tropicals we grow are not necessarily aroids, but they don't necessarily need a ton of soil. Look at pothos—it'll grow up a tree. It really is almost an air plant. Some species, we feel like we've cut two to three weeks off the production cycles just by having more air to the roots."

Cutting back on plastic is reason #2 for the switch.

“We had some people ask about trying to reduce plastic. That set us in motion to trying to find a solution to that, and there aren’t a lot of solutions out there.” That led them to Blackmore, which has been working on developing a waterproof paper sleeve for Ellepots that will hold up on the retail bench. “We figure that if we go to market with a nice decorative paper sleeve, we will reduce plastic by like 95%.” They’re not quite there yet, but “soon,” Michael says.

Michael will admit to one more benefit of Ellepots/Air Trays: excess greenhouse capacity. Smaller containers and faster turns have freed up 40% of their 200,000 sq. ft. of greenhouse, he says.

“So now we’re in the spot where we either need to take on more customers, or we’re perpetually going to be 40% empty.”



The “SausEdge” and handle packs

Rick Brown of Riverview Flower Farm in Riverview, Florida, is a pioneer of Ellepot production for retail, having launched his first two Ellepot products in 2006. One, the “SausEdge,” is still unique—Riverview is the only grower producing it. It’s a 60mm Ellepot, 12 in. long, placed on its side, four per custom Blackmore tray, with six annuals planted in the side, giving the customer 4 ft. of annuals they can use as edging (hence the name) or cut up for planting in beds. Rick says he used to grow as many as 15 varieties of SausEdge, but recently they tried Westhoff’s FloriGlory Corizon cuphea, and sell-through was so strong that, at least for now, 100% of their SausEdge production is of that one variety. Retail price (at Home Depot, Rick’s only customer) is \$19.98.

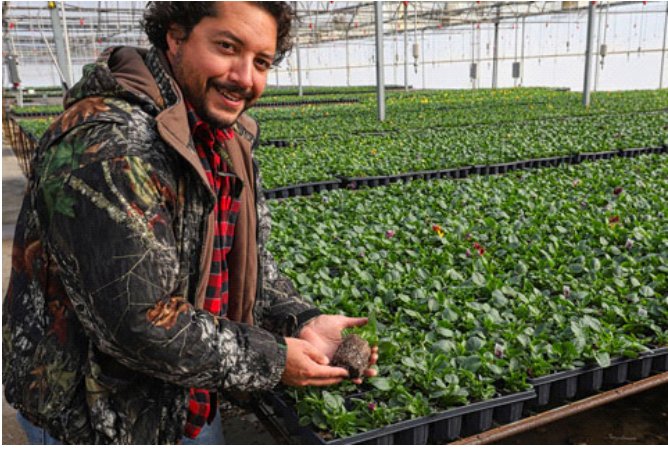
Pictured: Rick Brown with a seven-count handle pack of succulents.

Riverview’s second Ellepot product is handle packs in three different sizes: 60mm in nine-count trays, 60mm in seven-count trays, and 40mm in 16-count trays. Rick says they see 98% sell-through at Home Depot with these SKUs.

They call the seven-count unit their “Flower Power” packs. Right now, they’re featuring Sakata’s Calipetite calibrachoa in three colors: three pink, two blue and two yellow. Says Rick, “We used to do all kinds of assortments in [the seven-count pack], but that turned out to be the No. 1 seller ... they hit the table and they just buy ’em all. It’s amazing.” They’ll ship 7,000 per week in the season.

Another important Ellepot item for Riverview: Beach Bum Blue *evolvulus* from Dümmer Orange in a nine-count pack, for \$19.98. Commonly called blue daze, it’s a staple summer annual in Florida. “That has been a solid home run,” says Rick.

As for machines, Rick has two. At first, he didn’t think he could afford even one. But the cost of buying in pre-made Ellepots will quickly pay for a machine, he says, if you’re doing any volume.



A Grower-Retailer on Ellepots

We first visited Dallas-based Ruibal's Plants of Texas in 2019 and wrote about their Ellepot annuals then. We checked in with second-generation owner Matt Ruibal to see if they're still doing the program. Are they ever! Matt said they are growing a whopping 800,000 trays of annuals and groundcover in Ellepots each year now, from three production facilities serving their four Dallas retail locations (with a possible fifth on the way). They do that with two Ellepot machines. They grow for their own retail, but 60% of that production sells wholesale to landscapers. Price is \$2.19 per 65mm Ellepot—up from

\$1.50 when we visited.

Pictured: Ruibal's head grower Kevin Chretien shows off the root system of his pansies.

Customers appreciate the Ellepot product form, although Matt says there was a little bit of pushback in the beginning because they didn't know what it was. "There was actually more from the landscapers, understanding how to use it. Some were so used to taking the plastic pot off and loosening up the roots a little bit ... they were wanting to do the same thing with the Ellepot."

They sell in Blackmore 18-count landscape trays. "But if Mrs. Johnson wants six of something, she's more than welcome to pull them out of the tray." (They provide extra flats and cardboard trays for just such occasions.)

They're labor-efficient, Matt says. Workers can pick up four flats at a time instead of two and carry them vertically and the Ellepots don't fall out. Landscapers can plant them 20% faster than they can a regular 1801 flat.

"And there's a whole lot less cleanup on their end," says Matt. "They don't have to chase the 4-in. pots around, especially on a windy day." **GT**