

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

11/1/2022

Try Something New

Michael DeBerti



Brace yourselves—it's that time of year and I don't mean the holidays.

It's time for us growers to look at next spring.

This may seem a little daunting at first, but the planning process is what you make it. Some see it as a labor of love, while others call it a stressful time with strong reflection on last season's performance. This busy time of hard work, planning and reflection can be all-consuming, and the stress of getting it right can weigh heavy on a grower's shoulders. Wouldn't it be nice to have a crystal ball to see what lays ahead for next spring? While that's not a possibility, we do have the

next best thing: our experiences and data from previous years.

Pictured: Mast's summer trial gardens.

For many, we fall into a complacent mode of doing the familiar, sticking to our normal varieties and adjusting our production numbers to the data we gathered from seasons before. During the summer months, I have many opportunities to talk to growers about their programs and the varieties they choose. Many don't veer too far from their standard early program. If it isn't broke, don't fix it, right?

It's sometimes hard for one to take the approach of trying something different, especially without that crystal ball or excessive supporting data from years past. So each year growers find themselves at a crossroads—stick to what we know or travel the unknown.

While familiar may be safe, I'm an advocate for trying new varieties. I'm not saying convert an entire program over to something new, but I do recommend trying a small amount to step into the realm of what could be the next great plant. New varieties are part of what many young plant growers look forward to supplying each year, and by developing relationships with breeders around the world, we create an opportunity to bring our customers new and better varieties, as well as something incredibly unique.

The old adage, "Try it, you might like it," is somewhat relevant here. I always encourage the growers I speak with to recognize the new items that suppliers mark in their catalogs as "new and improved." But for many, seeing is

believing. Breeder websites provide information on the production of their new plants, as well as pictures of a finished pot along with technical recommendations. But if you're a grower who must physically see the plant and explore the variety on a deeper level, there's a simple solution: trial gardens.

During the summer months, many suppliers display outdoor trial gardens. These gardens allow the grower to see the plant develop to maturity, giving a more in-depth look at what to expect and how the product will finish. As a designer of such a garden that incorporates my company's product line of existing and new season varieties, I contest that it's truly worthwhile to see such a display. It gives the grower a widespread view of different possibilities that could expand or improve a production program.

While trial gardens are an excellent way for growers to familiarize themselves with a new product, I've found that another attribute to seeing the varieties in a growing environment is the spark of inspiration it instigates. There's something riveting about seeing new and improved genetics first-hand. Unique mixtures and expanded colors in a collection or series can give great visualization into the new season and encourage a grower to try something new. As growers, we get caught up in the strategy and data behind our upcoming season and sometimes forget the passion we have for this industry and these plants. Taking the time to see everything in person pulls us back to our roots and can inspire us to push for a stellar upcoming season.

Customers that make a point to add the new varieties to their selection have seen positive outcomes. Because new items haven't made their way to big box stores, retailers with the new and unique selections see add-on sales come their way. Many retail customers, from novice to master gardener, like to have something that sets their display apart from their neighbors. By offering items like this, you can establish yourself as a go-to retailer for the latest varieties on the market.

Still on the fence about adding something new to your production plan this year? Here are a few suggestions and incentives:

1. Commit a percentage of sales or pot sizes to new items. With a determined percentage, it will help alleviate the decision of how many and how much. By looking at a catalog's new items, the supplier's website or features in a trial garden, it's easy to do just that.
2. If your supplier informs you that you have room in your boxing for a few more trays, fill them with new items instead of filling them up with more of the current order.
3. Look at a few varieties and pick out a new one to grow alongside an existing favorite. By picking a known customer favorite genera or color base and growing it alongside something new, you can easily compare how well the new item is performing against its predecessor.
4. Try the new variety in a combination. Introduce the new by mixing it in with current favorites. Many times, you can accentuate the new variety with this pairing, which will highlight it for the customer.

Strap in, growers. It's that time of year. Things are going to get busy. Maybe you love it, maybe you're stressed. Either way, give something new a try to shake things up. Reconnect with your passion for this industry as you explore the colorful world breeders offer. You'll be glad you did. **GT**

Michael DeBerti is Senior Grower for Mast Young Plants in Grand Rapids, Michigan.