GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Field Trials With a Dose of Southern Charm

Jennifer Zurko



More than 800 varieties (including 220 combinations and 58 hanging baskets) were on display overlooking part of the 56 total acres of greenhouse you see in the background between two of Young's Plant Farm's Auburn, Alabama, locations.

This is the 12th year that Young's has opened up their trials area in early June to local growers, breeders, students and academics as part of the Southern Garden Tour. Like with other regional open houses, the Southern Garden Tour has evolved into an annual event organically.

Young's is the first stop on a three-day trek of meandering around field trials, with the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, being on the second day, culminating in a day at Metrolina Greenhouses in Huntersville, North Carolina, on the third.

It's a bit of driving—since, technically, you're visiting or driving through four different states in three days—but good music and entertaining podcasts help pass the time. Plus, since Costa Farms no longer holds its open house in Florida, this is the only field trials event for the Southeast market.

Built to help them collect their own data and aid in the decision-making process on what to add to their product lineup, Young's field trials aren't divided by breeder. They put all of the same crops together to get a true side-by-side comparison of how they perform in the Alabama heat and humidity.

"This allows us to be able to make the best decisions for production and the home gardener," said Penny Merritt-Price, Product Development Manager for Young's. "And it gives us a seat at the table with the different retailers and breeders."

Along with trials of new annuals (sun and shade), there are also some landscape beds that focus on trends. This year, there was a focus on plants for pollinators, natives and ones that matched Pantone's Color of the Year, Peach Fuzz.

The Southern Plant Tour began over a decade ago, but Penny said that they've really ramped up promoting the

event during the last three years, which is one of the reasons why they saw record attendance this year of more than 225 people.

“Our goal is to be the regional expert and this enables us to do that,” explained Bryan Young, one of the third generation of Young’s to be part of the business. “And it’s a good way to end the spring season.” **GT**