

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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## Right Plant, Right Time, Right Source

Bill Calkins

*Pictured: Innovative new forms like callused cuttings increase efficiency and reduce losses in perennial production. Ball Seed and its partners are constantly taking feedback and conducting research to create new options for perennial growers.*

A grower at a large greenhouse in Iowa with plenty of propagation experience was struggling to propagate Phlox subulata (Creeping Phlox) in the summer heat, and after losing too many young plants, threw up their hands and began ordering tens of thousands of liners to meet their production plan. Of course, this impacted profitability and hurt their bottom line. Working with their Ball Seed sales representative, they searched for a more cost-effective and practical solution.



Enter Darwin Perennials, one of the breeders and suppliers that partners with Ball Seed to deliver young plants to growers across North America. Perennial Product Representative (and 30-year perennials grower) Chris Fifo listened to the challenge, and the team at Darwin got to work in its Colombia farm research facilities and trial greenhouses to evaluate callused phlox cuttings and share a proof of concept with the Iowa grower. Results were positive and the subsequent May and June propagation of Phlox subulata callused cuttings were nearly 100% successful week after week.

This is one of many stories that highlights the team-based approach Ball Seed and its perennials partners employ to help customers solve challenges and optimize assortments. In this case, the grower worked with their sales rep, who in turn worked with supplier technical experts and R&D managers to find the best solution.

This type of success extends across the entire Ball Seed perennial supply partner network and shines a spotlight on the importance of feedback loops and close communication. Josh Roggenbuck, a regional product manager with Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Michigan, explained a few of the positive outcomes that result from traveling with Ball Seed sales reps.



“I have routines with a number of reps where we walk a customer’s crops together. During those crop-walking experiences, we often determine where timing, temperature and inputs could be adjusted to provide a nicer finished product. We also determine where our genetics might fill a hole or solve a problem that the grower has been experiencing,” he said. “Because I know our product lineup exclusively, I can explain to all parties involved how our genetics in bareroot and plugs will work in comparison to some of our competitors.”

*Pictured: Consistency and uniformity in production is a key to success and it all starts with high-quality inputs from the Ball Seed network.*

Furthermore, according to Josh, everyone gets to hear “the rest of the story” about supply chain situations regarding tissue culture, cutting or seed supply. Reps get to know the ins and outs of how long it takes to produce a plug or bareroot crop. Armed with that knowledge, the reps know how much lead time is needed to get their growers first in line should issues arise somewhere in the supply chain.

## Hand in hand

Close communication from customer to sales rep to suppliers and rooting stations to the unrooted production farms and TC labs keeps everyone in the loop and working towards the same goal. For Ball Seed, this requires being a complete source for perennials, according to Technical Sales Manager Brad Harvey.

“Ball Seed is committed to excellence in perennials, working hand in hand with growers, from ease of ordering and production support as needed, and our sales team, keeping customers up to date on all the latest perennials news,” Brad said. “We have a vast supply chain to support perennials, working closely with the more than 30 young plant suppliers across North America to ensure the top-performing varieties are available on the market. Ball Seed reps can help tailor products to fit every grower’s needs.”

Sometimes such close relationships allow product representatives to spot opportunities that might not be apparent—for example, seed-raised perennial programs that open new markets for growers. Chris has had the opportunity to work with dozens of greenhouse owners and managers (who may or may not have perennials experience) and has developed customized seed perennials programs, either as new offerings or to complement existing programs, but in different container sizes.

“In most cases, customers are looking to offer a differentiated perennials offering using seed or plugs,” Chris explained. “Many seed varieties are suitable to fill 2.5-quart containers at the same retail value as a vegetatively propagated input or they’re suitable for quart programs when vegetative is sometimes not suitable.”

Product knowledge and high quality are paramount when it comes to building compelling product mixes, and this begins at the source. Walter Gardens Head Grower Drew Koschmann is quick to point to the importance of quality, beginning with stock, as a backbone of Ball Seed’s perennials supply network.



*Pictured: Delivering perennial color to retail throughout the year leads to consistent sales. All partners in the Ball Seed network work with growers to create winning plans.*

“Our partnerships with customers are built around the quality of Walters’ plugs and bareroot plants,” he said. “To ensure the highest quality for the perennials we ship, we work closely with stock suppliers to receive exceptional perennial cuttings and tissue culture, invest in researching the newest technologies to help manage greenhouse environments or aid in sorting product, and keep up to date with all the newest chemistries to help maintain quality through plant growth regulators or fungicides and insecticide applications.”

### **Top genetics & leading support**

Brad is quick to point to both the cutting-edge and reliable products customers have come to trust.

“Ball Seed is a complete source for the leading perennial genetics to ensure growers have the most up-to-date products for their market,” he said. “And the technical support we offer brings solution-based results.”

Shining a spotlight on the plants and teams that bring them to market is always critical, especially for a multigenerational, 100-plus-year-old plant company like Ball. Having beautiful varieties grabs attention, but they must perform at every step in the supply chain to set everyone up for success, explained Sarah Greenwood, Global Product Development Manager at Darwin Perennials.

“The genetics must ship well as unrooted, root well for young plant producers, grow well for finished growers and, ultimately, offer great garden performance so the end consumer is successful,” Sarah said. “When genetics can provide a solution at every point in the supply chain, it’s a win across the board. Also, since not every plant performs well in every region or for every grower it’s important to have the best product mix from the start.”

There are many examples of breakthrough product solutions in the Ball Seed assortment and breeder partners work closely with sales reps and growers to understand production concerns and bring these challenges to their breeders. A fantastic example is the new Summerlong Agastache series from Darwin. Sarah is pleased to tell the story of how this series came from a solutions-oriented breeding process that began by hearing customers’ pain points.

“We had some customers go from not liking agastache due to concerns about the bloom window being too short to them being excited about the genus after seeing the long bloom window that the Summerlong series was selected for,” she explained. “It’s a great feeling to be able to give our customers products that provide solutions to their problems.” **GT**