

GROWERTALKS

Features

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The Reward is Worth the Wait

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Delayed gratification is a learned necessity shared by growers and researchers alike. Scientists put such great effort into our experiments, only to wait for results and the slow trickle of adoption. Conversely, even in the fastest production operations, growers wait a season to see the fruits of their labor, as many watch shrubs and trees spend multiple birthdays in production before they're ready to be sold. However, geneticists and breeders have an entirely different understanding of time. With the effort and trialing that goes into developing new shrubs, geneticists tend to measure time in years or even decades.

With this in mind, I wanted to shake things up with our annual insight into upcoming shrub releases. This year, I decided to do a little digging into the process and efforts that it takes to get a new variety to market, as well as glean an insight into the future of ornamental breeding. Over the past several weeks I've talked to plant breeders, geneticists, plant branding companies, nursery growers and consumers. I can honestly say I feel that I now have a much stronger understanding of what it takes to get a new variety on the market. More than that, I now have my finger on the pulse of current breeding trends and a good guess about where plant breeding is heading in the next decade.

First of all, what I found most apparent was the time it takes to get plants ready for market. Some breeders work on their plants for years, only to find that they need to pivot to new pursuits or a program might get dropped entirely. Only those truly persistent can make it to market. Therein lies the question: with a lead time of eight to 12 years, how do you decide what to breed?

I asked that very question to several breeders and brand managers. One thing I found particularly interesting is the concept of "reverse engineering" for customer desires. A lot of breeding is driven by market trends. When working with bedding plants or color, that might mean you're planning for a couple years out, however, woodies present an entirely different challenge. Breeders and the plant branding industry have to forecast market trends years in advance. Luckily, many of these groups will employ people much smarter than I that are skilled at reading trends and predicting the future. It's kind of like the stock market—you have to make educated guesses and some folks are just amazing at seeing the future.

Another concept that came up was the perceived demand. I found it quite interesting that when I asked general consumers what they want to see from breeding, the term "natives" was brought up regularly. However, when I asked what specific plant traits were desirable, very few attributes desired would readily describe native plants. It seems that sometimes ideals get in the way of desires. In fact, one of the only terms that I'd on a regular basis that I

would consider a trait of native plants was “pollinator friendly.” A great deal of the plants that our industry is developing are pollinator friendly, with showy flowers being a regularly occurring demand.

Consumers want to see butterflies, bees, and other pollinating insects in their gardens. Whereas, to combat the “invasive” tag that many consumers can readily apply to what we call volunteer plants, breeders will often pursue sterility in their releases. This means that while there are showy flowers, they often won’t produce pollen in high enough concentrations to attract these beautiful pollinators that we all know and love. That means efforts can either go to support pollinators or inhibit perceived “invasiveness.”

One of my favorite consumer responses that I received was the desire for more fragrance. Nothing is quite as nostalgic as the sweet smell of gardenia or the citrus-y fragrance of osmanthus. More than just fragrance, consumers want to see additional benefits in their garden beyond aesthetics. Multi-value was a term that I really like. Including pleasant fragrances and aromas provides those extras we all want in the landscape.

On the private side, market trends are pushing for more compact plants, bigger colors and, of course, lower-maintenance requirements. Generational buying drives a lot of these targets. Yards are getting smaller overall and compact plants fit these smaller landscapes perfectly. One method breeders use to pursue low-maintenance plants is expose them to poor environments and provide little care.

Another interesting thing is how private and public geneticists can harmonize, each exploring distinct targets. Geneticists working for private industry can take some risks that can be detrimental to university scientists; whereas, many plant breeders working for universities or the federal government need to spread their efforts across several taxa to mitigate the risk that comes with focusing on a single or few species. However, private industry plant breeders have the added onus that the variety they’re developing needs to be immediately marketable, while public scientists can take more risks with problem solving (i.e., disease resistance), while marketability can sometimes take the back seat.

As for the future of breeding, it seems much of that is going to be dependent on public perceptions of transgenic and genetically modified plants. Much of the ornamental breeding today relies on traditional methods of crossing parents and evaluating progeny. However, as the public warms to transgenic and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), we may eventually see more of transgenic developments used like we see in other agricultural crops. One thing we’re likely to see is full genetic evaluation of many different taxa. The technology is rapidly advancing, where just five or so years ago, a fully explored genome might be a cost-prohibitive bottleneck. However, now it’s a simple request. Having repositories of genomes will help breeders jump hurdles and continue to create exciting new varieties.

One concept I didn’t hear too much about that I expected was the use of A.I. As it seems to be making its way into many aspects of our lives, I can only imagine what A.I. can eventually do for breeding. One thing that it can help with in the immediate future is data analysis, which is a huge portion of plant breeding. Analyzing marketing trends and forecasting is also on the forefront.

As I started this article with the idea of the delayed gratification that nobody knows like woody breeders, the sheer time and effort that has gone into these new releases is inspiring. Some of these varieties have been in development for more than 10 years and that’s why they’re all fantastic. Because of this extended development, breeders need to cast a wide net, often with less than 3% of plants evaluated ever making it to market. As a writer I know how hard it is to cut lines that I love to make a word count. I can only imagine what it feels like to cull a gorgeous plant that

doesn't quite make the cut, but that's what makes these introductions incredible.

The plants that make it to market truly are the "best of the best" and here are some of the 2026 releases that I'm most excited about:



1. Rhapsiolepis Pink Pearl (Star Roses and Plants)

I haven't been known to be the biggest fan of Indian hawthorn, however, this one might change my mind. This disease-resistant rhapsiolepis will be in high demand come next spring, as landscapers look for low-maintenance hedges. This one is also drought resistant and comes with copious blooms to attract pollinators to your garden. Growing 4- to 5-ft. tall and wide, the versatile size will lend it to several settings.

2. Hydrangea Fairytrail Fresco Cascade (Proven Winners ColorChoice Shrubs)

Wow, talk about a patio plant! When I saw this entry from Proven Winners, I knew I was going to get one of these for the large planter on my back porch. The weeping habit makes these perfect for containers and hanging baskets. Tons of color with flower buds forming on each node. Growing in a container makes it incredibly easy to manage pH and control bloom color from Caribbean blue to clear pink. Red fall foliage is the cherry on top.

3. Rose Purple Aura (Star Roses and Plants)

Fragrance abounds from this new rose introduction—an aroma described as a blend of cinnamon, clove and spice from those flower-sommeliers. This distinctive rose will make its presence known in the garden.

4. Viburnum PowFUME (Bailey)

Ooh, that smell! Covered with large early spring, sweet fragrant blooms, this semi-evergreen viburnum from the First Editions collection is an absolute stunner. We just discussed how everyone is seeking aroma in the garden and this is an easy way to get it. The upright and dense habit provides season-long flowers and continual interest as the season progresses. What's even better for the growers is this plant finishes in a container very quickly.



5. Lantana Fiesta Limonada Rosa (Monrovia)

Lantana is a workhorse in the landscape. It's great for pollinators, drought resistant and grows like a weed. The newest introduction from Monrovia's Fiesta series hits the market in 2026 under the Distinctive Selections label has bright magenta and yellow blooms on a compact, mounding plant. The flowers are sterile, which means more bloom power throughout the season. This is a semi-trailing variety, making it perfect for planters or hanging baskets. It's hardy to Zone 10 and can be used as an annual in cooler climates.

6. Hydrangea paniculata Spring Sizzle (Bailey)

There are many panicle hydrangea on the market and isn't that nice ...? This specific hydrangea is the result of a program established to pursue an *H. paniculata* that consistently blooms in the south. This presents quite the challenge with the warm nights we experience throughout the summer. When breeders at First Editions witnessed a single red flower emerging from the sea of white in the spring of 2019, they knew they were onto something. One of the earliest blooming *H. paniculata* on the market, the white flowers will transform to a deep red, even in the warmest of regions. The upright nature makes this perfect for hedges of feature plantings.

7. Hydrangea paniculata Bubble Bath (Van Belle Nursery)

This one from the Bloomin' Easy collection was particularly exciting because of its compact form and shape. A true "meatball" hydrangea, these grow in nice, uniform spheres covered in flowers that resemble—you guessed it—a bubble bath! I love the color and can see so many settings for this plant, be it in a container planter or a low boarder plant. I'll definitely be getting some of these for my yard.

8. Spirea Crimson Feathers (Monrovia)

This is a very unique and colorful plant, with striking scarlet-red new growth that pops against the chartreuse older leaves. Mid-summer, clusters of white flowers emerge, adding another exciting element. It requires no pruning and very little maintenance. Its compact habit makes it great for containers or smaller garden beds. Another fantastic

addition to Monrovia's Distinct Selections for 2026. **GT**

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