

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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A Digitalis Tour With Kube-Pak

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This season's exit of Greenleaf/Aris had a big impact on relationships. Buyers and brokers who placed a significant number of orders through Greenleaf and want to re-book those sales are now free-wheeling through the industry. A number of facilities have jumped into liner production to fill the void, and I expect the scrambling will continue through the winter. Greenleaf shipped product this fall, so the first real shifts will show up with the February and March shipments—orders being placed right about now.

Dalmatian Peach showcases the classic reason why foxgloves exist as a garden citizen: tall stems, big florets, lots of spikes. A major reason for the popularity of this particular color are the very pale spots that fade into the trumpet, emphasizing the towers of graduated peach instead. If you look carefully, you won't see this trait in other series.

One company hoping to re-home those orders is Kube-Pak of Allentown, New Jersey. Their perennial program is now three times larger than it was two years ago, backed by the large capacity of their annual liner and finished pot business. Management plans to leverage their long-standing strength in seed germination and, to that end, they now ship 72-cell liners, a popular perennial size.

Lines are becoming more blurred between annual and perennial producers, as each side picks up desirable traits from the other and market pressures seek more efficient solutions. One shipment, more choices. If a buyer is happy with a grower, he or she will naturally ask, "What else do you grow?" It's all about mastering the expertise behind the quality, so the merging of annual/perennial producers is a reflection of the merging technologies and processes behind them. In the end, a good grower is a good grower. Kube-Pak's bet, in this case, is that perennial buyers could use a place that germinates seeds well—a Kube-Pak strength.



Walking through the digitalis

Tray sales for digitalis are dominated by traditional buyers with established habits. Once they find something they like, they stick to their trusted varieties. That trust goes up the supply chain. Gardeners buy their favorites each year, which means the garden centers source those same varieties, which means the liner producers make most of their sales satisfying existing demand.

A mix of Camelot colors in a bouquet. Don't overlook the role of digitalis in

the cut flower garden. That popularity powers sales through the garden center channel.

I've seen digitalis sold successfully through the chains as a premium perennial in large pots. The trick in this channel is to under-serve the market. Digitalis sells fast in its prime, but crashes the moment the florets come off the plants. Storms and bad weather can knock them around. If you program the crop as one-and-done, you ship just enough inventory to get the market excited to clear the bench. It's not trash if it's sold.



Garden centers have a longer, gentler sales cycle for digitalis than the mass market, so they historically do well offering the crop. Most digitalis retails through the home garden sector as a result. It's a specialty crop for garden centers and high-end landscapers who promote it as a special statement or perhaps a nod to nostalgia. Plug trays generally go to growers who plant them out in the fall, bulk them up over winter and sell for earlier spring flower sales. Watch for aphids; other than that pest, you'll be fine. Although generally a sun-loving plant, southern gardens (beyond Zone 8)

should consider planting digitalis with partial or full shade cover, depending on the spring heat.

A crop of Arctic Fox in finished nursery pots. This series is one of the interspecific innovators of the category. Not as big and not as tall as the usual foxglove, it trades size for longevity. The plant will come back for several seasons, not just the usual two.

Some perennials such as gaillardia or salvia don't benefit from vernalization. They're so prolific without it, why not cut down the crop time? Other perennials, such as digitalis, strongly benefit from vernalization, even the first-year flowering (FYF) varieties.



On the calendar, the sweet spot for vernalization occurs as the pot is growing out, after the plug is planted. To get maximum bulk from the digitalis crop, plant your plugs in the fall. Pots vernalize over the winter for the biggest displays and the most reliable results. For example, Kube-Pak sells finished pots of 9-in. digitalis in flower. To get a predictable product, they vernalize their entire potted crop, without exception—even FYF varieties like the Dottie series. Digitalis just works that way.

This photo of mixed Dottie colors, a first-year-flowering variety, shows the large leaf and robust habit typical of the genus. The plant in a 9-in. finished pot is a substantial creature.

Notes on the varieties

The plug program at Kube-Pak offers a range of digitalis cultivars from the following series:

- Camelot: Very vigorous. Well-established series for decades. Trusted by buyers.
- Dalmatian: Similar to Camelot. Less vigorous. Peach is very popular.
- Dottie: FYF. Flowers are stronger the second year.
- Excelsior: Taller variety. Can reach 60 in. when happy. Blooms later in the spring.
- Hanabee: Newest FYF variety.
- Foxy: Well-known series to the buyers.
- Strawberry: Thicker leaf with darker foliage. Different look.

Although digitalis is dominated by its history, trends do appear. The most interesting innovations are the interspecific cultivars like Arctic Fox and Panther that extend the lifespan beyond a biennial. These plants go beyond two years, more like three to five. Flower spikes aren't as tall (2 ft. rather than 3 ft.), but they come back more often.

- Arctic Fox: Comes in two colors, Rose and Lemon Cream. Blooms around May/June.
- Panther: Comes in a rosy-pink. Noted for its repeat bloom within a season. **GT**

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