

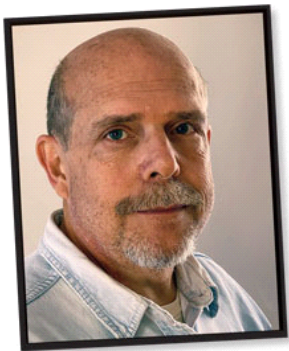
GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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The Modern Brunnera

Lowell Halvorson



LOWELL HALVORSON

Brunnera has carved out a flourishing role in retail sales over the past decade. Playing against the normal rules of market growth, brunnera is a curious exception, remarkable for every reason you wouldn't expect.

Jack Frost: The OG

Jack Frost redefined the criteria for a good brunnera when Walters Gardens introduced it back in 2002: heart-shaped leaves, silver crackle on the foliage and sprays of powder-blue flowers early in the season. Its impact can't be understated because Jack Frost flipped the category.

Brunneras have beautiful flowers, but nobody talks about them much these days. That's the impact of Jack Frost. Sales today focus on the foliage and forget about the forget-me-nots.

One reason is the brief and early display of the sprays. The foliage on Jack Frost looks good through the spring. It's a testament to the breeding that, 25 years later, the cultivar is still a tent-pole of the category.

Heat tolerance

Beyond Jack Frost, consider a heat-tolerant variety like Permafrost. One of the traits holding brunnera sales back is the summer melt—when the heat kicks in, the plant collapses until the following spring reinvigorates it. In general, brunnera is sold as a firmly spring citizen of the shade garden, but Permafrost lasts much longer into the summer and can even handle gardens with mixed sun and shade. It has learned to tolerate drier areas better than the usual crowd. This is a Northern statement, by the way, important to IGCs in the garden belt from Boston and New York to Chicago and St. Louis and back to D.C.

Heat tolerance is a significant improvement for brunnera. It translates into a better retail season before the sale and strong garden performance afterward. Permafrost isn't doing anything revolutionary, but it still expands the boundaries of what a good brunnera can do—not by changing the patterns or colors, but by pushing the summer leaf.

Several cultivars now advertise summer performance as a selling feature, with new ones leapfrogging over older ones. Breeders are taking brunnera and making it more brunner-y, distilling a popular template into a more concentrated form and making it last longer. I expect this feature to become the catalyst for future sales growth.



Alternative leaves

Size matters: One of the three major display variations among brunnera is leaf size. A good example is Alexander's Great. When the cultivar matures, it can send out leaves in the size range of a standard hosta, complete with strong mottling. Also worth noting is the conditional nature of brunnera leaf size: the happier the plant, the bigger the leaf.

Alexander's Great is the big one. Leaf sizes can get into hosta territory on mature plantings, so long as they're well-sited.

Silver tops: Another area where variation occurs is in the amount of silvery felt over the leaves. Generally, the fuzzier the leaf, the more deer resistance a cultivar exhibits. Good examples are Looking Glass (very

silvery), Silver Heart (heat tolerant and silvery) and Queen of Diamonds (large and silvery).

Different crackling (or not): Crackling patterns can differ between cultivars. Most brunneras sold in the commercial channel follow the very popular crackling found in Jack Frost, but exceptions do exist. Emerald Mist has a more mottled than crackled look. Variegata has widely variable cream margins. *B. macrophylla* is entirely green and emphasizes the forget-me-not sprays. Langtrees is the old-timey source for Jack Frost and shows early markings of what Jack Frost would become.

Brunnera sales going forward

Brunneras come in a simple foliage-first box set: crackles and silvers in regular and large leaf sizes. Heat tolerance is building momentum, but that's an invisible benefit on the retail bench. Brunneras are the exception to the typical rules of strong sales. They don't have the usual markets of dramatic breakthroughs in color or form to ignite a revenue growth.

The jump in brunnera sales is probably the result of two factors: One is the increase in shaded gardens caused by the re-wilding of American homes. There are more trees in more places as a general rule. Products like pulmonaria, astilbe and polemonium have all jumped their numbers because they're easily recognized as desirable shade plants.

Deer resistance is the other key factor. Brunnera is the closest genus to hosta in looks and behavior, and the terry cloth quality of the leaves discourages animals from damaging the plant. Rough texture is one of the hallmarks of a deer-resistant variety.

Firms with a heavy commitment to hostas are well-served by expanding their brunnera programs. Brunnera is often considered a deer-resistant alternative to hosta where the animal is a pest. Hosta sales are down, while brunnera sales are up, partially because brunnera has that hosta-like dynamic so popular in the market now. **GT**

Lowell Halvorson is a consultant and writer in Fairfield, Connecticut, for retail and wholesale horticulture, specializing in business development. He also covers the breeding community for GrowerTalks magazine. You can contact him at (203) 257-9345 or halvorson@triadicon.com.