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COMING UP THIS WEEK:

- New annuals at Costa Farms
- At their HQ for houseplants
- Behind lock and key
- An amazing new retail nursery
- At TPIE - orchids and aroids
- E-commerce
- Finally I ...
- Finally II ...

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Live from Florida and TPIE



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Greetings from Ft. Lauderdale, where as soon as this Midwesterner arrived, the temperature dropped into the 30s and I had to take the blame. Thankfully, I haven't heard of any plant damage due to the near-freeze, but some Homestead and Apopka growers I talked with said they did run overhead irrigation or pull all-night heater duty just in case. The next day it was back to balmy perfection.

Beyond that, the mood in the South Florida industry seems quite upbeat, and with good reason: foliage, houseplants and tropicals remain hot among consumers, and demand is strong. The growing season has been warm and productive; in fact, the cold front of this week was the first of the season.

I'm down here for the week with my wife, Laurie (the real horticulturist in the family), and *Green Profit* Editor-at-Large Ellen Wells, who also pens our weekly *buZZ!* newsletter and twice-monthly *Tropical Topics* newsletter (yes, I keep her busy). We traveled together Monday to hit retail grower Pinder's Nursery (actually, the full name is "The Community Garden Center at Pinder's Nursery," which puts the emphasis on their love of their community) up above Palm Beach county in a little town called Palm City along Florida's Treasure Coast. Then we went south to western Palm Beach county and the nursery-rich town of Loxahatchee to visit a vanda orchid grower named Antonio "Tony" Romani, owner of R&R Nursery. This gregarious guy eats, sleeps and breathes vandas and is not bashful about it. If there's a botanical garden doing an orchid show near you, chances are the vandas came from him. Top quality!

You can read Ellen's detailed coverage of both visits [HERE](#) (she took the notes, I took the photos).

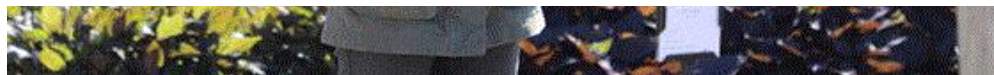


At Costa's Season Premier Trial and HQ

I always hit Costa Farm's outdoor trial during TPIE to see if I can spot any brand new annuals slated for potential launch at the California Spring Trials (March 28-April 2). On hand to help me out was Trial Manager Katie McCarver (below), who pointed out some of the following introductions:



happy to present:



FlashForward, FotoFinish petunia. These are two new seed petunias from Syngenta. FlashForward is a spreading/mounding type, while FotoFinish seemed a bit taller and later, while still mounding and spreading. I was told that FotoFinish will be a replacement for the Ramblin' and Plush series. I'm sure we'll get the full story at Syngenta's Spring Trial.



FotoFinish (left) and FlashForward (right).

Doubleshot snapdragon (below) by Hem impressed Katie with its large, open, upward-facing flowers that give the gardener plenty of color.



Lantana Luscious Royale Red Zone (below) by Proven Winners has a fabulous habit, says Katie—compact and uniform, with showy, bright flowers.



Cannas from Classic Caladiums. They'd just arrived, and weren't yet planted, but I snooped around and learned that, while Classic didn't breed these, they're producing them in their Florida caladium fields to be virus-free. Stay tuned as I suss out more about this program.





At HQ, looking at houseplants

Annuals are fine, but I'm in Homestead for foliage, and Costa delivered at their HQ on 162nd Ave. Most notable in their offerings for 2020 is a line called "Trending Tropicals"—a collection of "rare and unique indoor plants to satisfy the cravings of new and experienced plant collectors." Not all are rare (one is a fiddleleaf fig), but there are some very cool offerings, including Little Swiss monstera, Network calathea and Raven Black ZZ plant. They're sold on these nice POP-covered shippers with upscale pots and tags, and are available to all retailers.



In their Colorful Aglaonemas line is new Edgy White (below), featuring rich green foliage with white margins and white stems. New plant hunter Mike Rimland told me it holds up great indoors, thanks to all that chlorophyll in the leaves.



For those of you selling plants for terrariums, DIY projects, floral designs or what-have-you, Costa will be launching a line of 2 in. mini succulents. Expect them by the end of the year.



Something else Costa is emphasizing these days is sustainability. They have a “Biomatters Collection” featuring pots made of bamboo, straw and rice husks. They're also touting sustainability efforts at their nurseries, including the use of sustainable mediums like coir,

equipping their office roof with solar panels (which provide 25% of their electricity) and recycling 189 tons of cardboard and 1,195 tons of plastic.

Behind lock and key

Being the editor of *GrowerTalks* gets me into some interesting places, such as the Royal Palace in the Netherlands and the top secret plant pipeline room at Costa Farms. Mike Rimland will have to kill me if I tell you some of what I saw, but I can reveal their new variegated monstera, called Thai Constellation—which just happened to win TPIE’s Favorite New Foliage Plant award. I guess that means the days of \$150 monstera cuttings on eBay are numbered.



Mike likes Thai Constellation, but he really likes aglaonema Superstar (below). Mike calls it, “The best green and white aglaonema I’ve seen in my 40 years in the business.” For the really top secret stuff from Costa, you’ll have to watch TPIE’s Favorite New Foliage Plant competition in coming years.



We discover an amazing retail nursery

While in Homestead, Laurie and I always hit some of the interesting plant retailers along Krome Avenue, which is sort of the “Main Street” of Homestead. A regular stop is Isaac Farms, a succulent specialist that also stocks thousands of containers. They’ve got a koi pond, a cat ... it’s always a fun stop.

This year, just south of Isaac Farms, we discovered a new retailer called Succulent World. Wow! It almost puts Isaac’s to shame. The buildings themselves made my jaw drop open. They have two massive (I paced off 45 ft. x 100 ft.) concrete-posted, open-sided building housing thousands of big containers. Seven interesting three- and five-sided gazebo structures house more containers and lots of succulents. Everything is built beautifully, with metal roofs. There’s a koi pond in the middle ... hey, wait a minute ... this seems familiar ...

Yup. Darned if the place wasn’t built by Isaac Farms! Owner Alvaro Isaac wasn’t available to ask about it, but manager Beda (sorry, Beda, I didn’t get your last name) told me it was built to retail their large pots and the plants to go in them ... 13 in. and larger she said. The nursery just opened in May, and they are still adding features, such as a snack bar for light lunches. They’ve got a classroom space, and out back is a very nice succulent production area with a freshly

planted allee of breadfruit trees down each side of the central drive. The space is going to be very attractive when they grow in.



All in all, Succulent World is one of the most interesting new retail sites I've seen in some time. The Isaacs have invested a lot of thought (and money) in the bones of the facility.

[HERE](#) is a short video I found of the place that will give you a better look at the place than my photos can.

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At TPIE

The **Tropical Plant International Exposition** kicked off Wednesday morning with long lines at registration—a good sign for the trade show business and our industry in general. Are houseplants hot? Yup! FNGLA COO Linda Adams told me on-site registration Wednesday by 1 p.m. was 600 more than in 2019 ... and a good number of registrants (both pre- and on-site) were first-timers to the show. On the show floor, exhibitors said they could see and feel the increase in traffic. One veteran TPIE exhibitor told me his booth saw the best traffic he could remember.



TPIE is a wonderland of tropical colors and textures, but two crops seemed to dominate this year: orchids and aroids. I don't know if there were more orchid breeders and growers exhibiting than in past years, but at least two attendees commented to me about the number of orchid exhibitors present. Yes, phalaenopsis dominate, but there were plenty of places to source dendrobiums and more exotic genera, as well.

As for aroids—philodendron, monstera, aglaonema, alocasia, nephthytis, pothos and hundred more—if you're not selling them, you're missing out on the hottest of the Instagram-worthy plant category. Luckily, propagators and growers are rushing to fill the gap. Suddenly, green monstera and swiss cheese philodendron are not so hard to find as they were just a year or two ago. Availability will go up ... and prices will go down. Hopefully, the industry can find a balance of the two, and keep interest of consumers high enough to command a generous but fair margin.



Monstera front-and-center in the Alpha Botanicals booth.

The most photographed booth at TPIE might have been that of [Aroid Greenhouses](#) of Ft. Lauderdale. They've got a full-fledged food truck-turned plant truck, which they park at local farmers' markets and so on. They sell [online](#), too, and get top dollar for their "rare" plants—how about \$290 for the aforementioned Thai Constellation? (I put "rare" in quote marks because how long will it remain hard to find?)



Inside Aroid's plant truck, which even has a greenhouse-style skylight.

They do sell wholesale, and one northeast retailer I bumped into told me he'd just spend \$5,000 with them to boost his offering of unusual houseplants. He wants to become the brick-and-mortar destination for the plant collectors in his area. Of his current crop of houseplant shoppers he said, "I've never seen such a glowing enthusiasm." To fuel their passion, he's hosting a plant swap at his garden center in February.



E-commerce

That leads to a third hot topic of TPIE: Online sales. Numerous exhibitors told me they'd talked to quite a few attendees who are launching online plant businesses and were seeking stuff to sell. Apparently, our category is extra hot right now, and the few companies doing online plant sales that we might be able to name are about to be joined by a plethora of new players, all seeking a piece of that \$290 monstera market.

An online seller's biggest challenge, besides sourcing plants, is packing them in a way that gets them to their new home in one piece. Container and packaging specialists A-Roo Company earned TPIE's Favorite New Product accolades for their line of Plant Shipping Packs, which come in various configurations for everything from plugs to large pots.

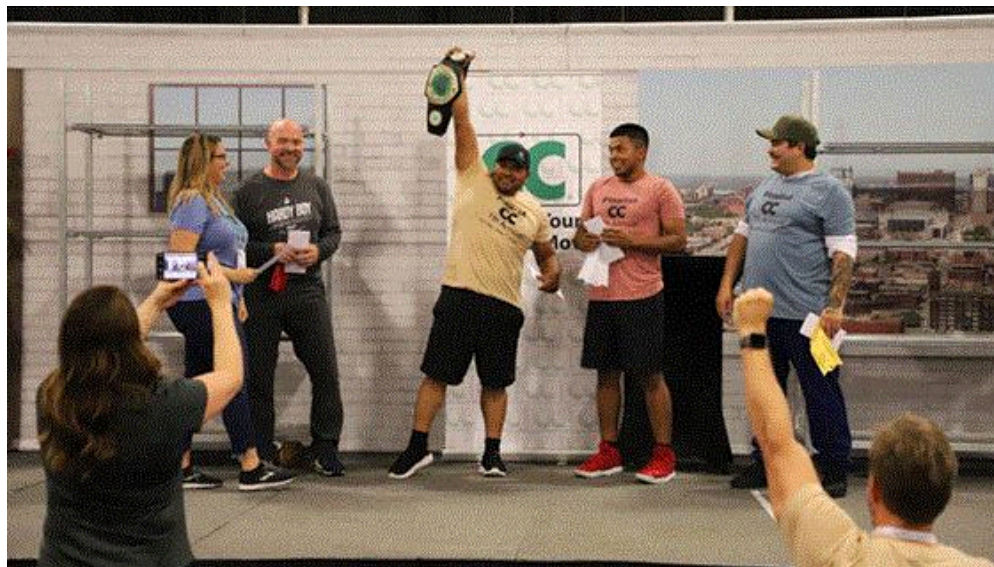


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Finally I ...

It's not all work at TPIE (wait, this is work?). Container Centralen (CC) held its Sixth Annual Rack Building Competition on the tradeshow stage. The spirited contest ("spirited" because there's also a bar to help encourage festive cheering) featured two former champions, Juan Corro of McCorkle Nursery, and Ben Eagle of Welby Gardens, plus two fresh faces, Jonathan Noyola of Spring Creek Growers and Ramon Ponce of Skagit Horticulture. The goal is to assemble a three-shelf CC trolley as quickly as possible.

After three rounds of competition, Juan Corro came out on top in both categories: quickest single build (23:08—which might be the quickest ever in the six years of the contest) and fastest average time for three rounds (25.17). Personally, I think it was Juan's choice of music (Motorhead's "The Game") that gave him the edge. Congrats, Juan!



Also fun was the mano e mano contest between CC USA President Sonny Costin and CC Europe CEO Roel de Jong. Roel beat Sonny by just a quarter of a shelf. Sonny's goal is to encourage his boss to start a rack building contest in Europe, so there can eventually be an international showdown.



Just don't forget the drink tickets and snacks, Roel!

Finally II ...

By the time you read this, TPIE 2020 will be a memory, and I'll be home to do laundry, then fly off Sunday to Germany for the big IPM Essen tradeshow. Tuesday night, I'll once again be emceeing the [AIPH International Grower of the Year Awards](#), then covering the show. I'm also planning on visiting one or two high-tech greenhouses in the Netherlands. Stay tuned for highlights of all that in the next *Acres Online*.

As for my TPIE coverage, there's a lot more to share, including more new plants and new products. To that end, Laurie and I are shooting video of Danny Summers' Cool Products Award winners. I'll get that edited and posted ASAP. To know exactly when it's ready to view, subscribe to our YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/growertalks) and click the notification button.

And mark your calendars for TPIE 2021, January 20-22. It will be held in Tampa for the first time

ever. That should be fun, as there will be a whole new crop of Florida growers and retailers to visit.



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