

## Michigan Garden Plant Tour Part 1

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### IN THIS EDITION

Walters Gardens  
Pell Greenhouses  
(A side trip to Mike Fernandez's house)  
Mast Young Plants

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## Hello there, dear reader!

**Chris:** Hello there, dear reader, and welcome to something you had no idea was coming to your inbox: a second piece, a part two, a reprise of our California Summer Trials (CAST) newsletter *Acres of Buzz!* Our purpose? To bring you MORE new varieties, but this time from the annual Michigan Garden Plant Tour. Why Michigan? Because CAST was missing some of its usual, er "cast" of characters, including Danziger and Proven Winners, and both have displays in Michigan, so we figured we'd take the drive over from Chicago (and Cleveland) to see what they've got to offer?



Raker-Roberta's, one of our seven stops during our three-day tour.

Now let me introduce the "we" in "we figured:" fellow Bobblehead Bill Calkins and guest Bobblehead Jen Zurko—who didn't have any video duties on this trip, so I'm making her write for a living. Welcome back, Bill! And welcome to the newsletter, Jen!

**Bill:** Hey, boss! They let me across the border from Ohio. Whew. And the first place I landed was a gigantic perennial garden. #ILoveMyPlantJob

**Jen:** Thanks! It's kinda nice coming out from behind the video camera once in a while.

**Chris:** I should also give credit to Snoopy the Drone, who fearlessly shot the high-altitude photos I'm sharing.

Now, a couple of quick words about this event we're covering and how we'll cover it: This year's edition was the 18th annual Garden Plant Tour, which is a two-week, four-greenhouse, one-university, self-guided tour of outdoor container, and bed annual and perennial trials.

We started Monday at Walters Gardens in Zeeland, went northwest to Pell Greenhouses in Hudsonville, then—breaking from the official trial schedule—drove straight north into the woods and farm country of Conklin to stop at Mike Fernandez's house, where the Danziger Market Manager for North America runs a tidy little trial on his 40-acre farm.

Day two, Tuesday, started at Mast Young Plants in nearby Grand Rapids, and then we did the hour-long drive to Michigan State University, drove an hour south to Raker-Roberta's in Litchfield, then 90 minutes east to our lodging in Monroe, below Detroit. Day three, Wednesday, we wrapped up with a visit to Four Star Greenhouse to check out the new Proven Winners stuff and to see their latest construction projects before making the five-hour drive back home to Chicagoland.

In today's *Acres of Buzz!*, we'll write about the first portion of the trip: Walters, Pell, Danziger



and Mast. Tomorrow we'll cover MSU, Raker-Roberta's and Four Star. You'll get those two big stops on Thursday. As with our California Trials coverage, it's just a skim of the highlights—to really experience it, you have to be there! Now, which one of you Bobbleheads wants to lead off?



## Walters Gardens

**Bill:** Lady Bobbleheads first. I showed up late to Walters anyways and you guys were early. Jen, take it away.

**Jen:** After we took a few minutes to pet the Walters outdoor gray-and-white cat (who, ironically, is named Gray & White) Marketing Manager Andrew Jager, and VP of Marketing and Industry Relations Christa (Walters) Steenwyk took time out of their day to show us around their numerous perennial display beds.



Walters refers to their display gardens as their “living catalog” of about 1,100 perennial varieties, which includes the Dennis and Harriet Walters Hosta Walk, hibiscus, daylilies, mangave (that unusual manfreda/agave cross that looks like it should grow on Mars) and more. If you're into perennials, professionally or personally, Walters is a great place to learn more about them.

A few of the memorable ones for me were:

Sedum Rock 'N Grow Back in Black, probably because it doesn't look like a traditional sedum, (although Christa said consumers on their Instagram account picked the traditional over Back in Black when asked to choose). This variety is guaranteed to have the darkest foliage you've seen on a sedum. It's got garnet red flowers, but isn't selected for them—it's selected for the almost



black foliage. Zones 3 to 9.



**Sedum Rock 'N Grow Back in Black.**

The second one for me was Leucanthemum Banana Cream II. I first saw this when Regional Product Manager Laura Robles presented it at the virtual MANTS show back in January, so it was nice to see it in person. The original Banana Cream was Proven Winners' best-selling perennial, but now with the improvement, Andrew said it's much easier to produce for growers. It no longer needs vernalization and it's now a first year-flowering perennial with more semi-double blooms. And it holds its cream-yellow color longer. Zones 5 to 9.



**Leucanthemum Banana Cream II (photo by Walters Gardens, as it was almost out of bloom when we saw it).**

Only a few of their hibiscus varieties were blooming, but the few that were looked amazing. Hibiscus is one of my favorite plants and their newest in the Summerific line (Edge of Night) has dark foliage and pink flowers that I hope to score for my own garden someday.



Oh, and if you happen to be on Instagram this week (August 2-8), visit Walters Gardens' page to help them celebrate the second annual "Summerific Week." It's a social media and marketing program centered solely on their Summerific Hibiscus line. They get garden writers involved, too, to help promote it to consumers. The timing is purposeful since all 11 of their Summerifics should be in full bloom by now.

**Bill:** Good picks, Jen Z! I had Banana Cream in my top three, too. I'm going to take big groups of plants. Walters had a large bed amended with primarily sand that looked like a Martian landscape and was full of mangave plants. (If you aren't aware, mangave are crosses between manfreda and agave.) Their Mad About Mangave Collection includes a really weird mix of colors, shapes and textures that demonstrate the amazing variety of the species. And they all have cool names like Bad Hair Day, Desert Dragon and Jabber Jaws to name a few. Some of the cool new ones for 2022 are Praying Hands, Pineapple Punch and Thunderbird.







Walters' bed of mangave. Alas, these are Zone 7 and won't overwinter in Michigan, so Walters lifts them and stores them in pots for planting again the next year. That's Praying Hands, below.



In an effort to find shade as the sun got higher in the sky, we moved on to the Hosta Walk (featuring more than 150 varieties), which not only cooled us down, but gave us a chance to learn about the breeding work that's been done at Walters for years. Some of the new hostas that caught our attention were Miss America (part of the Proven Winners Shadowlands Collection), a sun-tolerant variety with variegated foliage, big lavender flowers and the vigor of a solid-color type. We all liked Silly String, with more narrow foliage and a cool pattern; and Dancing with Dragons, with heart-shaped, rippled leaves and a wavy look.





Andrew Jager with Hosta Miss America.

**Chris:** I'd complain that you kids took all the good stuff, but thankfully, Walters has plenty of good stuff to go around! Here are three I'd put into my own garden—the highest praise I can offer:

The Kniphofia Pyromania collection was in full bloom and striking. They'll bloom from the Fourth of July onward. The collection has six colors; Orange Blaze was "soft-launched" last year and is now fully available, we were told. Zones 5b to 9.





*Kniphofia Pyromania Backdraft.*

*Pennisetum Lemon Squeeze* is part of Proven Winners' Prairie Winds collection. This fountain grass has striking gold foliage (which doesn't burn in the sun, they say) topped with copper panicles starting mid-summer.





**Pennisetum Prairie Winds Lemon Squeeze.**

Lastly, we got a sneak peek at Astilbe Darkside of the Moon (not to be confused with the Pink Floyd album of the similar name). Like Back in Black, it's got dark, dark foliage. Blooms are purply-pink.



## Pell Greenhouses

**Bill:** When we pulled down the driveway at Pell Greenhouses, we immediately saw a huge “tree” of hanging baskets surrounded by container trials and knew we were in the right place. We got the lowdown on the trial from Darin Decator, the new (as of 2020) co-owner of Pell (along with second-generation owner Michael Pell). Pell specializes in young plants from Dümmer Orange, Westhoff, Danziger, Green Fuse and a few others; and also does contract growing for several of the local Michigan mass market growers.





**Chris:** The trial was the smallest of all that we visited; their primary goal, said Darin, is to plant one plant per pot to see how they perform and to answer the question, "If the consumer buys one plant and puts it in the ground, what will it look like?" Pell had dropped out of the Michigan Garden Plant Tour for several years, but decided to rejoin this year. While the trial is modest, it does have that striking centerpiece of calibrachoa that Bill mentioned in his intro. That's Darin showing it off, as photographed by Snoopy.



## Danziger

**Jen:** We got a special invite to Danziger's Market Manager Mike Fernandez's private trials at his 40-acre farm outside of Grand Rapids, where he has a donkey named Jack (who was suspicious of us), a goat named Peachy (who was hiding from us) and a dog named Lovey (who was VERY excited to see us).





**Chris:** This place was a surprise! On a hidden clearing in the woods behind his house, Mike has a large plot of outdoor trials (along with two greenhouses) where we saw about 400 pots and baskets of Danziger's very latest varieties. This is not a catalog—it's a proving ground for new-variety candidates and their comparisons in pots and baskets. Many brokers and buyers crash Mike's place over a three-week span to study his trials. Bill, what did you crash Mike's place to see?

**Bill:** I was there to see flowers! And when I felt the heat and humidity, I was especially interested in what was holding up because Mike didn't have much shade out there. I have to say, one of my absolute favorite plants we saw in Michigan was *Salvia Sallyfun Pure White*, part of the Sallyfun series of *Salvia farinacea*. The series is touted for its summer heat performance and I can tell you it was in full bloom at this trial and at a couple others on down the road.



*Salvia Sallyfun Pure White.*

**Chris:** Good pick, Bill—*S. farinacea* is absolutely one of my favorite annuals ... in any color!

**Jen:** Speaking of summer heat performance, one of the future varieties that caught our collective eye was a heat-tolerant sutera (bacopa) that looked pretty good considering how hot it was. It



had some flowers while all the others were just green. We might see this introduced in 2023 for '24.



The new ones (showing flowers despite the heat) are in the foreground.

**Chris:** Colibri is Danziger's "controlled growth" compact calibrachoa. Colibri Pink Bling, Purple Bling and Exotic Red are now allowed in North America, as Danziger has gotten permission to use this star pattern, which is protected by utility patent. The same goes for Calibri Abstract, which has a painted-flower look (that's Abstract Pink, shown). And in the multi-colored Ombre calibrachos, the yet-to-be-named 20-9610 will probably join Pink, Yellow, Blush and Blue, all introduced last year for '21.





**Jen:** Lastly, how about that large display of Danziger's Durabella combinations? These are designed for low input costs—three liners will fill out a 12-in. basket or tub in 12 weeks or less. We liked Durabella Ombre Sundown (below), featuring three of the Colibri Ombre colors.



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## Mast Young Plants

**Bill:** I was really looking forward to the Mast trial and it certainly didn't disappoint. They've been setting up trials for at least 18 years and started when they saw summer displays at Colorado State University and Welby Greenhouses that had become a popular event for growers in the area. Like in Colorado, the Michigan tour has now become an annual must-attend event.



According to GM Brian Weesies, the Mast trial is set up as a “living catalog” with A-to-Z trials in 20 beds filled with 22 varieties each. And that's just the upper part. Down the hill, they've expanded to include an All-America Selections trial, as well as hundreds of containers in sun and shade. I spent time looking over comparison trials of angelonia, celosia and lantana, and can see why growers make it a point to stop by when selecting the varieties to build programs.

A couple new intros that I keyed in on were Syngenta's Petunia Itsy White, a small-flowered variety that will no doubt replace bacopa in some summer combos.

I also noticed the performance of Helianthus Sol Seeker Yellow from Danziger, exclusive to Mast as a liner input. It has a big habit with tons of small to medium yellow blooms and dark flower centers. I can see it as a patio cut flower or nice statement in the garden.





**Helianthus Sol Seeker Yellow.**

**Jen:** I noted a few of Brian's favorites for this year that he mentioned, including Artemisia SunFern (Darwin Perennials), Calibrachoa Calitastic Bordeaux Star (Westhoff), Calibrachoa Colibri Purple Bling and Pink Bling (Danziger), Petunia Blanket Silver Surprise (Green Fuse), Mimulus Mai Tai Red (Danziger), and Petunia Crazytunia Mayan Sunset (Westhoff).





Mimulus Mai Tai Red (above) and Petunia Crazytunia Mayan Sunset (below).





**Chris:** Grower Michael DeBerti created most of the scores of combination pots and baskets in the trial. They're not randomly put together—Brian made sure to tell us that Michael puts a lot of design into each combo. They also may include plants from different breeders in one pot, but all of the plants are available from Mast. I especially liked this one below (Deco-Pot #119), which includes *Carex Red Rooster*, *Coleus Main Street Wall Street*, *Salvia splendens Saucy Coral* and *Calibrachoa Mini Famous Neo Orange + Eye*.





**Bill:** Well, as Jen's brother-in-law says when he wants to get off the phone, "That's it!"

**Jen:** He DOES say that! He's a man of few words. Unlike you jokers.

**Chris:** Your brother-in-law is only partially correct: That's it for *today*. Thursday brings Part 2 of our report from Michigan, when we cover Michigan State University, Raker-Roberta's and Four Star Greenhouse/Proven Winners. See you then!

**Bill and Jen:** So long, everybody!



Thanks for reading! See you next time,

Chris, Jen & Bill



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