

Michigan Garden Plant Tour Part 2

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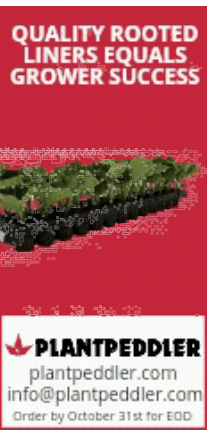
IN THIS EDITION

Michigan State University
Raker-Roberta's
Four Star Greenhouse

30 YEARS wave

Join the Party!





Welcome back!

Chris: Welcome back to our special Michigan edition of *Acres of Buzz!*, our annual new variety newsletter. Usually, AofB, as we call it, is relegated to covering the California Trials; this year we decided to hit the road and expand our coverage into Michigan and the state's annual Garden Plant Tour to bring you even more new varieties—after all, new varieties are the lifeblood of the industry, are they not?

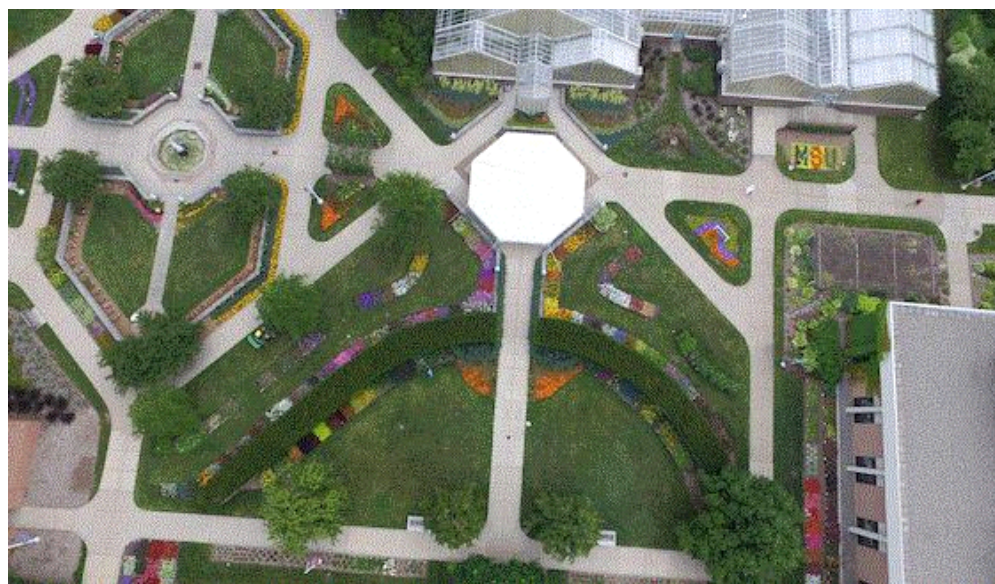
Jen: They are indeed!

Bill: So take us to school, boss ... literally!



Michigan State University

Chris: The Michigan State University trial beds, which have a 35-year history of decorating the campus, wind around the expansive grounds of the horticulture, plant science and biology departments. There's also a large 4-H Children's Garden, if you want to bring the crumb-crunchers along on your trial visit.



Jen: Between the display trials and the decorative flower beds, trial garden manager Daedre McGrath said there are 300 to 400 “sponsored” varieties—those supplied by breeders who pay for the privilege of being on display. There are also plenty of perennials, herbs, veggies, landscape succulents, woodies and more; all told, the gardens contain some 30,000 plants, so it's a pretty display. Each bed had accurate labeling—something some trials I've seen really struggle with, so kudos to Daedre and her team!

Bill: Before we left, I put on my journalist hat, grabbed my little notebook and interviewed Daedre old-school, without even turning on Zoom ... or a tape recorder. According to Daedre, MSU employs at least 15 students year-round working in 2 acres of trials surrounding the horticulture building. She feels the hands-on experience is invaluable for students, adding to their education in a practical way, learning first-hand what it's like to plant and maintain a big garden. Pictured are Daedre (right) with two of them: Cole Spence and Rylee Hrynak.



I also asked her about the future of the trials and she discussed the expansion of perennials. MSU plans to add more three-year trials of perennial varieties and she'll be looking for more sponsored perennial entries to add to the selection in the ground already, most from Walters and Terra Nova.



A Sweet Treat



Raker-Roberta's

Chris: Jen, you truly thought we were lost in the cornfields of Michigan as we drove the hour south from MSU to the little burg of Litchfield.

Jen: I did think that! I thought we should stop to ask the local deer for directions. But, I had nothing to fear, as once we rounded the bend on Rainey Road, I saw rows and rows of color, so I knew we had arrived.



Trials Manager Greg Michalak said Raker-Roberta's has participated in the Garden Plant Tour since 2004 and it's since evolved into a very large trial, with many beds of row trials and over 200 hanging baskets of every calibrachoa you could think of. There are over 3,000 varieties over 6 acres, including 100 different types of basil and 85 different seed petunias.

Most of the beds featured annuals, but they had some perennials and a bed of cut flowers. Thirty-five different breeders were represented, including many beds that were sponsored, plus an All-America Selections trial.

The yellow labels indicated the ones Raker-Roberta's grows, so there were quite a bit there that they don't offer. But Greg said that they use the trials to conduct their own evaluations to see if they should include the plants in their offering. Susie Raker-Zimmerman said it was a hard gardening year in their area and the trials showed some of that—a lot of rain and humidity. Plus the deer were bad this year. All of the gazanias were literally eaten to the roots.

"The goal out here is to be a 'real trial,'" said Susie. "They get care, but it's real-world care."

Bill: I was impressed at the number of comparison trials at Raker. Greg rattled them off and I struggled to keep up in my notes: basil, lobelia, calibrachoa, coleus, sunflower, nepeta, monarda, osteospermum and petunias. There may have been more! If you're looking to change up your assortment in the next couple years and can get to Raker to make selections, just do it. In my opinion, the basil tasted the best ... Chris, what stood out to you?



Coleus comparisons.

Chris: Basil! One hundred and three varieties of basil, to be precise. I found it fascinating that they'd go to that much trouble to source so many unusual varieties of an herb. To be fair, it had been hot and most of the varieties were looking a bit beat up (especially the purple-leaved ones), but it gave me a chance to see which of the 103 varieties was the toughest and most disease-resistant.

My assessment (as a non-professional basil trial reader): If you want a big-leafed variety, go for Napoletano. A big-leafed variety with ruffles? Tuscan. The downy mildew resistant cultivars from Rutgers (Thunderstruck, Passion and Obsession) all looked good. And if you want a spicier Thai basil, Everleaf Thai Towers from PanAmerican Seed was clean and green and holding up well (try making Thai peanut pesto with it—we put it on chicken breast).



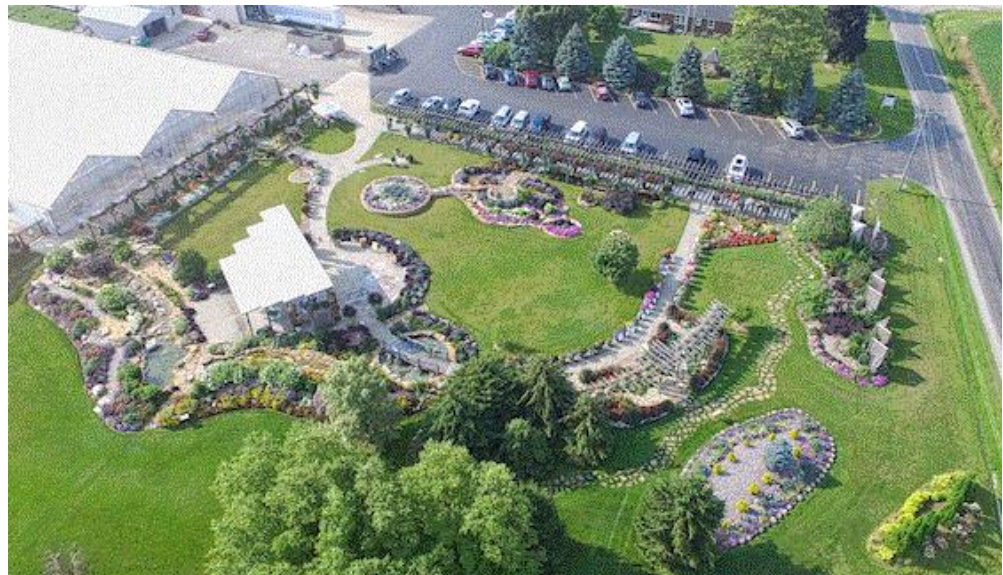
Where was the last place you saw 103 varieties of basil? (Olive Garden is the wrong answer.)

But enough about food—let me take us the rest of the way eastward across the state to our last stop, Four Star Greenhouse.



Four Star Greenhouse

Chris: We came to Four Star specifically to see the latest Proven Winners varieties, since PW has dropped out of the California Trials for good. We weren't sure what sort of setup Four Star would offer, but we should have known it would be world-class—beautifully grown and artfully displayed. We even had a chance to chat with owner Tom Smith, who'd heard we were coming by and—amazingly—didn't take the opportunity to avoid us! (I'm kidding, of course; he could not have been more gracious to these and all the other visitors.)



Jen: The way everything was displayed—with wooden pergolas, water features and curved beds—it reminded me of the Gardens at Ball here at Ball headquarters. We were told they had over 18,000 individual plants in their display garden this year. Trials Manager Josh Miller walked us through all of the new 2022 varieties that were in containers off to the side.

Chris: We should note that they were all grown in Proven Winners' new AquaPots, glazed ceramic self-watering planters, which not only looked great in the displays, but seemed to be doing a fabulous job for the plants.

Jen: One of my favorites was Salvia Unplugged Pink. This *S. guaranitica* hybrid is more of a compact garden salvia with tons of flower stalks and will also work well in a 12-in. basket. The bees were going CRAZY on this plant.



Salvia Uplugged Pink.

My other pick is Helianthus Suncredible Saturn, which Josh called a “cut flower machine.” Named for the dark ring around the center, Saturn has a tighter and more well-branched habit.



Helianthus Suncredible Saturn.

Bill: Maybe I just like little flowers (I already called out Petunia Itsy earlier), but standing out for me were Safari Dawn and Safari Sky, two Jamesbrittenia that will be useful as mid-summer color in the south and southwest. They respond well to drydowns and should do well in blazing sun. Dawn is pink and yellow, and Sky is more purple or lavender with less yellow in the center. Josh explained this species has historically been a rooting nightmare, but this new series is a solid rooter with plenty of vigor and can be grown just fine in dark, cool midwest spring production settings.



Safari Dawn (left) and Sky Jamesbrittenia.

Speaking of heat lovers, I also liked Verbena Cake Pops, a Texas native with pink and purple introduced for 2022. It's non-cycling and disease resistant that's shown blooming power all season in trials. It's positioned for baskets and window boxes, and looks like it will work well in big municipal baskets.



Verbena Cake Pops Purple and Pink.

Chris: You took one of my heat-lovers, but thankfully, left me two other hot-weather favorites (I'm a former Florida grower, after all): lantana and evolvulus, better known as blue daze. Lantana Luscious Citron is an improvement over Luscious Lemonade, with larger flowers in a richer yellow color. It's daylength neutral and sets little to no seed, so it's easy for growers and long-lasting for

gardeners. And the blue daze is called Blue My Mind XL, obviously an extra large version of Blue My Mind, with flowers said to be 30% to 50% bigger than the original's. I've always been a fan of blue daze; I think it's underused considering its true blue color, and extreme heat and drought tolerance.




Evolvulus Blue My Mind XL.



Tom, with Operations Manager Jeff Back.

Lastly, before starting the five-hour journey back home, we got a tour of Four Star's newest greenhouse expansion with Operations Manager (and my guitar mentor) Jeff "Shred" Back. But you won't read about that here; I'm saving it for my next *Acres Online*!

Okay, Bill and Jen, wrap it up for this year.



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Once again, it was fun ...

Bill: Once again, it was fun being a Bobblehead and walking rows of plants learning from folks who hold tremendous knowledge. Each trial had its own reason for being, and it was pretty clear by the end of our journey why more than 1,000 growers make the trip through Michigan each year reading trials and comparing plants. Sometimes the best new varieties just stand out and make the selection simple. Other times, it requires seeing plants for multiple years and having discussions with trial managers and young plant growers to learn the nuances. No matter how the decisions are made, the role that field trials play in our industry is clear, and Midwest and Great Lakes growers are fortunate to have the Michigan Garden Plant Tour each summer. If Chris and Jen let me, I'll be back in 2022 for sure.

Jen: Of course we will! You're stuck with us now.

And thanks for allowing me to be a guest Bobblehead writer. It was a nice change to not have to curse Final Cut Pro while editing videos. I like hanging out with you guys, looking at plants, eating bad food and listening to Guess Who Radio on Pandora. I think for our next trip, I'll have us listen to Motown ...

Chris: I know my Deep Chill music tends to put you to sleep ...

Anyway, as always, thanks for reading. We appreciate you! If you have questions or comments, shoot them to any of us by clicking on our names below.



Thanks for reading! See you next time,

Chris, Jen & Bill

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