

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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The Importance of Trials

Paul Westervelt

At the 2014 Perennial Plant Association Symposium, there was a lot of discussion about the importance of trialing after a universally well-respected plantsman called out the industry (and to some extent the audience) for dumping plants into the market with only the foggiest idea of how worthwhile they were. He said you can't trust breeders because they think all of their babies are great and you can't trust marketers because they get a healthy cut of each sale. It was a pretty bold statement and, I think, largely true.

I'm willing to bet we growers—every one of us—have added plants to production based on recommendations or pictures only to be dismally disappointed. *Coreopsis Limerock Ruby* is the go-to example for many folks. It's a stunning coreopsis, and probably would have sold on its legitimate merits, but was pitched as hardy to USDA Zone 6. It has about as much chance as an African violet in Zone 6. To my great surprise, I discovered it's still available for sale as hardy to Zone 7 by some vendors. I'm still betting on the African violet, as I've killed a few hundred Limerock Ruby in Zone 7 winters, but have yet to try the violet.

I felt more betrayed by *Phlox paniculata* Tiara, which was pitched as a double flowered form. The pictures looked amazing and I ordered some from a respected vendor who listed it as the "first double flowered form" in their description. I was willing to pay the relatively steep price to offer such a jewel to our customers. It turns out Tiara isn't double—the buds unfurl in such a way to appear double for all too brief a window. Most vendors that still sell Tiara include the caveat that it "appears double," but a few still don't.

I've since learned to be suspicious if almost everyone uses the same image. As fanatical as plant people are, they're going to photograph and post images of their latest acquisitions. But more to the point, if we as plant professionals have been duped, it stands to reason that our customers and their customers have been too, possibly with greater regularity. That thought leaves me with a very uneasy feeling. No one likes to feel like a sucker. How long will they keep trying?

The clear solution is trials—both in production and in the ground and, when possible, in different regions. Whoa, Paul! How much are you suggesting we take on and how are we going to pay for all of this? I'm suggesting you take on what you can and especially that which seems most dubious. If that intro really is the next best thing since sliced bread and peanut butter, then send me a half dozen for free at the right time of year and let me test it in my production. I'll provide all of the feedback we agree to at the outset of the trial. After 10 years of in-house production trials, I've learned that some plants that grow very well for other growers

just don't do well in my system. I wish I could say that I learned all of those lessons on a half dozen of a variety rather than a few hundred. Trials are valuable.

Production trials help protect growers from epic fails, but they're not enough as they help protect our customers. We also need in-ground trials. It doesn't matter how well Limerock Ruby grows in a pot from a spring planting if we hawk it year after year as hardy to Zone 6 or how stunning some corydalis look in March if they'll gasp and wheeze dramatically before finally collapsing in the summer heat.

After several years of off-and-on discussion, Saunders Brothers is installing an in-ground trial area to help us evaluate our plant offerings both for us and our customers. For in-ground performance in other regions, I look to the many great trial gardens around the country and the gardens of vendors. I also check out public gardens, which often include new plants in exciting combos, integrated into established gardens and/or in traditional trial gardens.

Trials are an investment that benefits us and our customers. **GT**

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