

GROWERTALKS

Culture Notes

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Time it Right

Chris Fifo



Since I began working with Darwin Perennials back in June, I've been on a bit of a fall color crusade. Why should mums get all the glory? There are many perennials that will show off their colors for fall decoration and very nicely complement mums in the garden center. One of my favorites is the Sombbrero series of echinacea from Darwin Perennials.

Pictured: Echinacea Sombbrero Adobe Orange.

Sombbrero Echinacea are extremely well branched and full bodied in the container. With 11 colors in the series, the palette is sure to be appealing during the fall season and command a premium price at retail.

- Sombbrero doesn't need a cold treatment to flower, and unlike other echinacea, bulks up well under long days. Combine this with their lengthy bloom time (even well past first frost), and they're easy to schedule for fall color without concern for them fading out.

- Sombbrero Echinacea are available from suppliers as rooted liners. Generally, I prefer a 72 or larger cell from the standpoint of maturity and

root mass. Smaller liners can be used, but will take some extra care in getting established.

- When purchasing liners, I would recommend checking with your supplier about PGRs applied to the crop. An application of Configure in the liner stage can be beneficial for branching. However, if applied within two weeks of transplanting, it can affect the speed of rooting out into the container.

- The benefit of summer production and fall sales of Sombbrero is that echinacea love the heat and light. They can finish relatively quickly without environmental manipulation. Therefore, they lend themselves well to outdoor production with either drip or sprinkler irrigation. The only caution would be for a couple weeks after transplant. A little shade and some careful watering until they're established can produce a more uniform crop.

- Transplant Sombbrero liners 1 plant per pot into 2.5-qt or 1-gal. pots, or 3 ppp for 2- to 3-gal. containers (Maybe a deco pot? Maybe three different colors for a mix?). Media should be well drained with a pH of 5.8 to 6.2. (I don't like the pH dropping below 5.7.) Controlled-release fertilizer incorporated into the media is common; I would recommend a medium to higher rate. Top-dress is also okay, but avoid application too close to the transplanted plug.

- As I mentioned, these can finish relatively quickly: eight to 10 weeks for August flowering and 10 to 12 weeks for

sales into October. For multi-plant containers, I would add another two weeks. With Sombrero having such a long bloom time, I like to be cautious and go with the longer scheduling. Obviously, there will be regional differences as well, so plan accordingly.

- Echinacea are long-day obligate for flowering and there may be some premature budding. Look carefully for buds and remove these at transplant and during the first two weeks after. This will speed up the lateral branching and bulking.
- Once established, monitor the nutrition; echinacea are relatively heavy feeders. (This is why I like controlled release in the summer.) If applying liquid feed, use a well-balanced formulation at 150 to 200 ppm N. Under high light and temperatures, a formulation with some ammoniacal nitrogen will provide a deeper green color than a more nitrate-based fertilizer.
- Likewise under high light, higher amounts of phosphorous are needed. Be aware of purpling on the lower leaves—this is an indication of deficiency and additional phosphorous should be applied, even if using controlled-release fertilizers. I've also seen deficiencies develop due to nutrients leaching from the media, often from excessive rainfall. These should be quickly replaced with liquid feed.
- Sombrero aren't particularly sensitive to pests or diseases and are relatively carefree in summer production. I've never experienced leaf spots or mildew on these, but I think a preventative fungicide spray is always a good thing—just like a good scouting program for insects.
- Sombrero are naturally compact at 18 to 20 in. in the container, so no PGRs are needed. If you're planning a trio container, be aware that Hot Coral is a little more compact and Tres Amigos and Flamenco Orange are a bit taller.

My goal isn't to take away from the fall mum market—that would be too much work! I just want to add new color, texture and interest to fall decorating. The Sombrero series of echinacea is one of my top choices to do that. Time them right, and go after those extended sales. **GT**

Chris Fifo joined Darwin Perennials as a product representative in June 2018. He brings 30 years of experience from Swift Greenhouses

in Iowa, where he was technical services advisor. Contact him at cfifo@ballhort.com or read his Notes From The Road blog at www.darwinperennials.com/blog.