

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

8/1/2019

Trials on Demand

Jennifer Zurko



The view from the rickety cherry picker over Smith Gardens' trials site was lovely (and a bit shaky). But on the ground, it was bustling with 180 local growers, retailers and landscapers studying the newest varieties and hearing all about their attributes from breeder representatives.

Located about an hour north of Seattle, Smith Gardens' facility in Marysville has been the home of the only trials site in the Pacific Northwest for the past five years. Eric Smith said the reason they dedicated some space and began the great undertaking of growing and hosting a

trials event was simply because their customers asked them to do it. And since they had the space and there was no other formal trial in the area, they decided to do it.

Pictured: April Herring-Murray (center) talks about Pacific Plug & Liner's new varieties.

"Our customers needed something for the climate here," said Eric, who pointed out that other large growers—like Metrolina (North Carolina), Bell Nursery (Maryland) and Battlefield Farms (Virginia)—have built their own dedicated trial sites and held events for years. Smith Gardens saw what those operations were doing and modeled their trials after them.

Eric ran through some of the numbers:

- 18 raised beds had 1,000 varieties in them (annuals and perennials)
- 192 hanging baskets
- 400 planters
- 50 breeder groups represented



Eric said 15% were what he called "advanced grower trials," which means they were completely new varieties, and 25% will make it into their production schedule for next year. Liners are transplanted into pots and started in the greenhouse, then the entire garden is transplanted Week 20.

"Our growers really use it to learn from and then we share what they've learned with the breeders," said Eric. "This really is a genetic showcase."

Eric acknowledges that the breeding companies are getting better when it comes to better genetics and supply, but that means the bar is set even higher as far as the growers and their customers are concerned.

"Growers are demanding more, so the margin of error is getting smaller," he said.

The Smith Gardens Trials event is held at the end of June every year, so if you're in the Pacific Northwest and interested in attending next year, contact Denise Mullins, Director of Product Innovation, trials@smithgardens.com. **GT**

Pictured: Craig Yoshida, Ball Seed (right), chats with local Washington State garden celebrity Cisco Morris, who gave an entertaining talk centered on his garden and favorite plants.