

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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A Little Bit Different

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The scene from our drone Snoopy looks a little bit different this year. And that's because A LOT of things are different due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The summer events we've always taken for granted were canceled, postponed or turned virtual, forcing all of us to learn about new varieties and read grower trials through the lens of FaceTime or Zoom.

But some events, like Ball Seed's Customer Day, were still able to be held, albeit a little bit differently. Using the Illinois Department of Public Health and Centers for Disease Control guidelines, the team at Ball created a "Plan B" for their annual Customer Day, which is always held the last Friday of July.

Usually, over 1,000 people gather in Ball's gardens to wander the paths, see how the new varieties are faring in the humid Chicagoland weather and to eat a great lunch under a big tent. With that being unrealistic this year, they decided to extend the event from one to 12 days in order to allow for safety and social distancing guidelines.

Jim Kennedy, Director of Sales for Ball Seed, said Ball's counterpart in England, Ball Colegrave, holds their summer event over a number of days and it works well for them, so they thought it would work here in the States, too.

“We knew we could be open because it was outside. And we knew that if we planned it right we could maintain groups that were within the recommendations of the State of Illinois,” Jim explained.

The registration limit was set at 50 per day with two different time slots, where attendees could go on a self-guided tour through the gardens using a map and a mobile app. Ball employees were stationed throughout the gardens, donning their face coverings and ready to answer any questions. And a box lunch was available, along with additional masks and hand sanitizer.

Jim said about 500 people came through the gardens during Customer Days—which is half what they normally see, but it was worth being open during this unprecedented time.

“One of the most common reactions of customers when we greet them walking in is, ‘Thank you for being open,’” he said. “I think they appreciate the effort we put in to show how the new varieties perform in our Midwest summers.”

The hope is that next year they can go back to the way Ball Customer Day was, but having to change things up this year has opened the door to other opportunities, like perhaps a hybrid of one big day and some small open houses, said Jim.

“One of the advantages of a single-day event is the opportunity for growers to interact with each other and learn from each other. But I can see us being open by appointment and figure out a way to allow ourselves to take the maximum advantage of the investment we make in the garden.”

(To watch a video tour of this year’s Gardens at Ball, visit ballseed.com/CustomerDays or go to the [GrowerTalks YouTube channel](#).) **GT**