

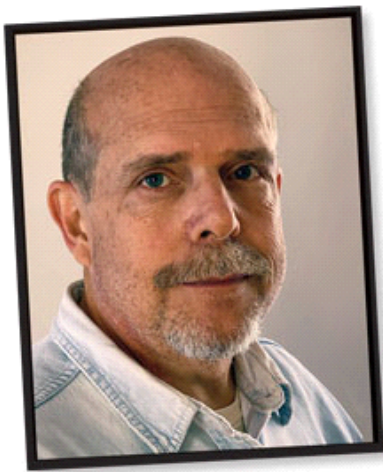
GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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The Splitting of Impatiens

Lowell Halvorson



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(Editor's note: I'm very happy to introduce Lowell, who's a long-time reader of GrowerTalks and a talented green industry writer, to our contributing staff.—JZ)

When analyzing impatiens sales these days, we can see that the category has split into two distinct segments, each with its own sweet spot and market focus. Wholesale price lists show this breakout regularly. They often follow "Impatiens" with "Impatiens, Hybrid" or perhaps "Impatiens, SunPatiens." This division reflects the new normal and, looking under the hood, we can also see each segment is shifting under different breeder and buyer pressures.

The "Armored Impatiens"

For example, production for *Impatiens walleriana* has been consolidating under the protective umbrellas of the Beacon and Imara series over the past several years. Strong Impatiens Downy Mildew (IDM) resistance is the table stakes required just to get into the game as growers nudge their large capital investments (crops) into safer harbors.

The result is a significant pruning of older series, colors and forms across the wholesale market; however, selection is a secondary issue against the prospect of so much capital that might belly up. Going forward, any new series will need equivalent armor to be taken seriously by growers, so this requirement will slow down the number and pace of series, color and form introductions for the near future.

The consumer market

The good news for *I. walleriana* is that the consumer market is willing to embrace it again. As a rule, sales ramp up in late April, peak in early May and exit by Memorial Day. Hangers, in particular, seem to be the sweet spot. For those who specialize in Mother's Day baskets, *walleriana* still tick off all the necessary checkboxes: great color, cheap input, fast growth, popular look, quick turnaround and known expectations. They're usually kept close to the house, an important detail.

You would expect to see similar improvements in bedding sales, but the topic becomes more nuanced for pots and flats. Several growers/retailers reported a brief resurgence of impatiens sales in the mid-2010s after all the drama died down. However, deer, not disease, truncated the revival.

Deer will take a nibble out of anything they pass by. If it tastes bad, they move along, but if it tastes good, they'll stop and eat it to the ground. Overbearing deer pressure has always been there, but their encroachment deeper into older, established neighborhoods is significant over the past decade.

In response, discouraged gardeners abandoned impatiens as a viable garden plant. As one grower-retailer in western Pennsylvania stated, "Impatiens needs to taste bad to deer." Then he would get excited about the category again.

If your market footprint suffers from deer problems, then flats and pots of impatiens will have trouble getting traction. Hangers, in the meantime, will sell well.

The landscape market

Landscapers, the primary buyers of flats these days, landed in a different place. Yes, they plant up municipalities, businesses, parks and golf courses in volume, but they also control significant chunks of the home market. As a group, their decisions move revenue around.

For landscapers, impatiens became toxic. The risks were too scary because they didn't have the margin to go back and fix a garden if problems occurred. They needed a one-and-done solution, but ditching impatiens led to a different problem. Once the pansies get a little long, what do you plant next? Impatiens was next in line; now they don't work anymore.



Pictured: SunPatiens (left) and Beacon Impatiens (right) in a teaching bed at Diefenbacher Greenhouses in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Begonias do work in the shade. They saw a little emergency push during the downy mildew crisis, but, long-term, they weren't viable. Begonias don't look like impatiens and they have a very small color palette. The "carpet of color" look is the point or begonias would have been planted in the first place.

Vincas do look like impatiens, but they can't go into the ground until June. Landscapers can't follow pansies

with vincas because they have to show up with something to get paid. Something has to fill the gap. New Guineas can handle the cooler spring, but they grow into beasts when planted in the soil and their cost would bust the budget. Not a working solution.

The hybrid impatiens

What did work were SunPatiens, the dominate series in a segment known as "Hybrid Impatiens," created by mixing *I. hawkerii* (New Guinea) genetics into the base *wallerianas*. It's a crowded field with other contenders like Bounce, Solarscape, Sun Harmony and others, but SunPatiens came out back in 2006.

I. hawkerii is not an easy gene pool to play in. All hybrid series have to work with the Jekyll-&-Hyde curse that New Guinea blood brings to their little cousins. The vigor that makes New Guineas big, brash and bold turns mild-manner *wallerianas* into "overly vigorous forms." It takes several years to bring those urges under control. Even SunPatiens had this issue (remember the Vigorous series?).

However, timing was the key. SunPatiens had ironed out the kinks before the downy mildew crisis hit. When the markets became chaotic, SunPatiens suddenly had a workalike product in a broad color range plus DM immunity plus deer distaste plus the original sun performance, backed by an existing grower network. Buyers swapped out

their purchase orders and re-adjusted themselves to a new normal.

Full circle

So now we come full circle. Traditional *wallerianas* contribute significant revenues these days in spring sales, especially with hangers and areas without heavy deer issues. The hybrids, once a minor player, now generate major revenues into the landscape market and the channels that serve them. When downy mildew crashed the North American market, the industry's major question circled around its replacement. The best replacement for impatiens, it turns out, are impatiens—just different ones. **GT**

Lowell Halvorson is a consultant and writer in Fairfield, Connecticut, for retail and wholesale horticulture, specializing in business development. He also covers the breeding community for GrowerTalks magazine. You can contact him at (203) 257-9345 or halvorson@triadicon.com.