

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

4/1/2023

Costa Farms' (Last ...?) Season Premiere

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For 13 years, Costa Farms in Miami, Florida, has been inviting breeders, retailers, broker reps, growers and other industry professionals to spend a couple of days to get a sneak peek at new varieties amongst the sun and palm trees. Calling it "Season Premiere," Costa Farms hosted attendees in their dedicated trial gardens with an event that's truly served as the start to the new variety season right before the California Spring Trials.

This year, they say, was Season Premiere's last hurrah.

John Sieg, VP of R&D for Costa Farms, said that, originally, Season Premiere was more of a retail-focused trial, held during the Tropical Plant International Expo in January. During the last couple of years, Costa Farms decided to open it up to more industry folks and moved it to the first week of March so that the plants were more in their prime.

"The original idea was to take advantage of the climate here and get an early look," said John. "Our timeframe right now mimics the rest of the country's spring, for the most part, so you really move that read-up early."

After going through some "financial introspection," John and his team have decided to take a step back to re-evaluate how they want to use the trials area moving forward.

"Last year wasn't a great year for many growers, so as a responsible company, everybody was challenged to look within their own departments and look at how they're using their resources," he explained. "From that, I think it became more of a look at how we're focusing our resources."

And coordinating and hosting an event like this takes a lot of resources. John said the whole process takes six to nine months, from when Costa Farms receives the seed/cuttings from the breeders, transplanting into quarts and then putting them in the trial garden—all the while reading and recording all of the plants' progress every step of the way, and providing all of that data to the breeding companies. Over 650 varieties are planted Weeks 51 and 52 that have to be maintained until early March.

Also, Costa Farms is a supplier of many different plant categories, with their bread-and-butter of tropical foliage, houseplants and foliage taking up a large chunk of their resources. They do grow annuals, but many that the rest of the country consider spring plants are better for the fall or don't work at all in the Southeast.

"We have over 70 petunias here and it's just not a big genus for the Southeast consumer," said John. "So we started looking at what are we getting out of it as opposed to what we used to get out of it."

Costa Farms' plans are to shrink the size of the trials garden to make it more manageable and concentrate on the plant categories that they specialize in. As head of R&D, John said another focus is using the space to develop

better growing protocols, including finding ways to use less chemicals.

“There’s a lot more rolling into this than the focus on annuals and perennials and the event itself,” said John.

As talk of the announcement made its way through the trials, some attendees and breeders said they would miss the Season Premiere event. Does John think Costa Farms will eventually be pressured to either bring it back or have some iteration of Season Premiere?

“I believe that it’s a forced conversation to see how we can re-invent and use everybody’s resources better,” he said. “As I’ve had conversations with a lot of the breeders, they’re also looking at ways to find a better process to focus on what we all need. We concentrate on those trials, and when they’re successful, we already have a path to launch.

“But I do think people will miss it. It’s really grown into a good tool for the industry.” **GT**

