

Columns

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Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs

Ellen C. Wells



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For you, California Spring Trials happened a month ago or more. For me, I returned from the annual tour of new varieties just six days ago. Everything is fresh in my mind—or at least most of it anyway. This year's Trials gave me much to think about, not necessarily in the way of plants, but how we sell them and what responsibilities fall on whose shoulders. I'll use this month's column to "whiteboard" them, i.e., throw them onto a page and let you all consider the connections and consequences on your own (look at me, turning a noun into a verb! I feel so very corporate.).

"New"

For the customer, what's new in the world of plants isn't a function of what comes from the breeder but from their own previous experience. For a new gardener, everything at your store is pretty much new.

Experienced gardeners haven't tried everything. Are "New!" signs all that effective? Proven Winners' Marshall Dirks reminded me of using "New Arrivals" signage—for me that could mean something new to the garden center or it could be a fresh shipment has just arrived. I'm also up for using signs that engage: "Have You Tried This?" "Did You Know?" and "Staff Member Michael's Favorite!"

Why So Expensive?

That's what my mother would ask if she saw the price of a 4-in. pot of petunias compared to the price of petunias in some sort of pack. She doesn't know the difference between seed and vegetative. She doesn't realize the benefits of planting bigger items compared to pack-sized plants. And neither do a lot of people with basic (or less) gardening knowledge. How good are we at making those differences known at point of purchase? Rolling the racks off the truck, slapping some pricing signs on them, and keeping the registers running are hard enough to keep up with during the spring rush.

When a "breeding breakthrough" comes along from a breeder—something that makes this particular variety so much different from the varieties that have come before it—how do we communicate that message to Joe and Jane Gardener? Syngenta's new Sunfinity sunflower from seed is one of those breakthroughs: It's a multi-bloom plant with sterile flowers, pumping out bright-yellow blooms all season long on a 3-ft. to 4-ft. plant. The suggested retail price for up to a 1.5-gal. pot is \$15 or higher. You've got to be sure it looks like a \$20

purchase now, not that it will be a \$20 plant in a month. Given options for less-expensive packs or even seed packets, the responsibility for justifying that price falls into whose hands?

Pony Up for Packaging

If you need a way to justify a higher price or to sell more plants per ring, then invest in packaging. That Sunfinity sunflower? They do require a tag, but not the branded pot. Branded pots draw attention to the product and make it look legit. The type of packaging used can help customers instinctively carry more out the door. For example, MasterTag and Summit developed a five-pot take-away carrier that is basically a combo container that just needs planting in a deco pot at home. In fact, Bachman's is using it right now. Another example is the new line of tags, pots and carriers from Burpee, designed to engage and inform.

We Have Beautiful Stuff

Period. End of story. Whether it's chard, a petunia or a non-descript green shubbery, it's all good. And if folks don't buy it, well, maybe there's a reason. Space, time, knowledge, interest, lack of disposable income and so on. All of those obstacles to a purchase can be overcome in some way. We have plants to address all of those issues. It's up to us to break down those walls for the customer. The question is, are we willing to take the time to help ourselves sell more?

Change, my friends, takes just one step to happen. **GP**