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More New, More Impressive!

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Wow! A lot can happen in 10 years.

That's about how long, give or take a year or two, we've been writing about cutting varieties and not just seed at Pack Trials. But think about it: if it weren't for the wild forms and habits of all the crazy vegetative stuff marketed by companies such as Jackson & Perkins, Selecta, Dummen, Ball and Syngenta, we might still be writing about the relative earliness of a pack of petunias. How dull!

Instead, it's mayhem in California each spring, with anywhere from 750 to 1000 new varieties and improvements to see, plus scads of marketing ideas, a plethora of clever displays, a gaggle of cultural trials ... we could use umpteen more ways to say we can't count all the valuable take-home stuff at Pack Trials, but we won't. Suffice it to say, we've packed all that we can into our July and August issues. We hope that 1) you've found something you can use; and 2) we inspired you to visit Pack Trials for yourself. You can easily do a half-dozen trials over a weekend and return home with enough ideas to last all season.

Read on for some new vegetative series, great marketing ideas, the sustainability trend, and a connection between flowers and seafood. If you do want to check them out for yourself, note the 2009 dates: March 28-April 3. Watch growertalks.com for a full planning guide.

Here are six more new vegetative series for your consideration.

[1] Syngenta featured vegetative breeding from Goldsmith, Fischer and their own breeders, so it's no wonder they had so many new offerings (more than 90 varieties and improvements). Here's a new dipladenia called Rio that's said to have little or no vining tendencies, making it easy for mixed containers and smaller pots. And it's great in hot, humid climates. The series starts with four colors.

[2] Velocity viola was shown by Ecke last year, but it gets its official introduction this year. We love the vigor and durability of vegetative violas, and while they aren't perennial like Etain and others, they do offer great heat and cold tolerance and five colors. That's Lemon & Plum Picotee pictured.

[3] Flirtation diascia, also from Proven Winners, is the first in a new series that they say will "reinvent the genus" over the next few years. Flirtation, which starts with one color, Pink, has a semi-trailing habit that grows about 10 in. high and 14 in. wide. Good for baskets and containers.

[4-5] Syngenta offers two new salvia series. Mesa (left) is a cross between *S. greggii* and *S. microphylla* that's said to have outstanding heat and drought tolerance. And it's being tested for cold hardiness (possibly Zone 6?). It's offered in four colors: Scarlet, Rose, Purple and Azure. On the right is *Salvia farinacea* Velocity (not to be confused with the viola mentioned earlier). Blue is the first in this series of early blooming, strong performers.

[6] Daredevil geraniums is a new series from Proven Winners. Bred by Syngenta, they appear to be a solid, work-horse series of large, vigorous plants that grow 15 in. to 18 in. tall and wide. The series starts with seven colors, including Mulberry, a fruit name we haven't before heard applied to a flower (they describe it as vibrant magenta).

It's a Small World

The most unexpected program introduced at Pack Trials this year had to be "Disney Garden" by MasterTag, featuring Disney characters such as Pooh & Friends on colorful pots, with accompanying colorful signage. The taglines are "Learn and Grow" and "Discover the magic of flowers." The pot wrap pulls off and becomes a bookmark. We were amazed that anyone in floriculture could afford a Disney license; MasterTag told us that Disney already had a gardening hardgoods line in the works, so adding a plant line was an easy brand extension to sell them on. It was a three-year project; the program hit retailers this spring.

Urban Gardener

More is being done with container gardening and vertical gardening to attract and cater to the urban and city gardener who has limited space. MasterTag helped design the "Urban Gardener" program featuring large pots in various colors with built-in trellises. The program was designed for bedding plant grower Kurtz Farms in Connecticut, and they're licensing it to growers under the company, Hubie Grown LLC.

Our Favorite New Color Name

Here's something that has always bugged us: Why are "salmon" and "coral" the only colors named after aquatic animals? Then again, we realize that "tuna," "mackerel" and "shrimp" don't sound very appealing. Then Dummen did it—they've given us the third color named for a sea creature: Lobster! And even better, it's part of their "Potunia" compact vegetative petunia series. Get it? Lobster pot-tunia? There's got to be a marketing gimmick in there somewhere.

The Bright Side of the Wall

In 2007, EuroAmerican Propagators built a giant wall across their property, slicing their trial ground in half and creating numerous nooks and niches for planting and display purposes. The wall remained for 2008, but it got

a fresh coat of paint and a whole new look. It serves as a good example of how plywood, paint and imagination can go a long way toward giving your business new life.

Top Programs Soldier On

Proven Winners and Simply Beautiful are generally considered to be the two bedding plant “brands” in the U.S. marketplace, and Proven Winners has the edge in longevity and dollars spent on advertising. As well, it has the edge in retailer acceptance—there’s hardly a small or large garden center that doesn’t carry the line. How well consumers recognize the name is open for debate, however. Proven Winners continues to push consumer advertising, announcing more expenditures in more places, both in print and on television. They also continue to work with garden celebrity P. Allen Smith, who makes numerous appearances in the mainstream media, usually touting a Proven Winners variety.

Meanwhile, Simply Beautiful, from Ball, is not backing down from the brand-building challenge. It’s targeted exclusively to independent garden centers, and Bill Calkins (pictured) is charged with getting the line into stores. He knows it’s a challenge (“Every independent [retailer] is independent—fiercely independent,” he says), but they’ve been working on creating easier-to-use POP and simple-but-effective messages for the end consumer. And their genetics are top notch.

2008’s Hot Trend: Sustainability

The “original green industry,” as some have taken to calling floriculture, is slowly but surely getting on board the eco-friendly train. While many growers in the U.S. seem to be taking a “wait and see” attitude regarding earth-friendly products and production practices, retailers are much more interested in offering their customers sustainable alternatives, and suppliers are moving quickly to be the first to develop the perfect biodegradable pot, signage material and organic fertilizer. At nearly every trial you could see some evidence of this trend. Even the breeders are getting into the act, showing displays of varieties that can be grown with less heat or fewer growth regulators, for instance.

John Henry had the largest display promoting sustainability (in fact, they had space at two locations: Dummen and Goldsmith). It was designed around their five new “Eco-Chic” packaging and signage materials: EcoRecycle (which contains up to 42% recycled material), EcoHarvest (a bio-plastic made from corn), EcoEarth (a mineral-based “plastic” that contains no petroleum products), EcoFiber (made from 86% wood fibers) and EcoPaper (100% coated biodegradable paper). These materials can be used for tags, signs, packaging and more.

MasterTag, meanwhile, showed three sustainable products: a line of trays made from 50% recycled plastic; a new mineral-based material from which they can make signs and tags; and a new line of biodegradable pots called “Straw Pots.” These were developed by grower Jack Van de Wetering of Ivy Acres on Long Island. Made from 80% rice straw and 20% coir bonded with natural latex, these have been in real-world production testing for several years. They hope to eventually have them working with automatic destackers. (The pots are being test marketed by at least two mass market retailers).

Other existing programs getting more play this year include Ball Horticultural Company’s “Circle of Life”

program, which utilizes a more “natural” growing medium and fertilizer, along with biodegradable pots and “locally grown” production; and Plug Connection’s “Organiks” line of organic vegetable and herb plugs and finished plants.