

Features

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A Whopper of a Begonia

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Annuals used to be regarded as wimpy little plants in 6-packs. You needed at least a flat to make any sort of impact and a flat might—if you were lucky—be enough to put on a show around, say, a mailbox. Slowly, that reality is changing. Breeders started developing some eye-popping performers that fill gallon containers with a single plant—the best-known of which is probably the Wave Petunia, developed by PanAmerican Seed in 1995. For a while that was about it in terms of mammoth annuals and it was a trailing variety.

Over the last year, we've featured several plants that are growing this new category—including the Dragon's Breath Celosia from Sakata and the Snow Princess Lobularia from Proven Winners. They're related to their cousins that grow in 6-packs the way singer Britney Spears and politician John Edwards are related—that is—distantly. (According to Forbes, those two are seventh cousins, three times removed.) These mammoths are game changers for growers, landscapers, retailers and consumers.

A spectacular example is the Whopper Begonia bred by Benary—a company with extensive history breeding begonias—licensed by Ball Ingenuity and offered exclusively by Ball Seed.

Whopper is a seed-grown F1 series hybrid developed by Benary in Europe from 1995 to 2007. "Whopper came from an active breeding program by Benary to get large stature landscape begonias to market," said Bill Calkins, IGC Business Manager for Ball. "Ball Ingenuity works closely with Benary. We watched the trials. When two distinctly different begonias that filled two different needs, but similar profiles appeared, they took one to market and we took the other."

Whopper stood out during development for a few key reasons. First of all, as the name implies, it's a huge plant. It fills space quickly for landscapers, it's a tough plant, lasts from frost to frost, thrives in full sun or shade, and doesn't require much cleanup throughout the season. Homeowners love the size and versatility. It has many more blooms than Dragon Wing and a more upright habit. Whopper looks like a typical bedding plant begonia that ate its Wheaties and hit the gym. The leaves and flowers are supersized versions of what you think of when you think "begonia."

Whopper went through extensive trialing and has been on the market for five years. Every spring, the orders increase. “Across the country, there are hundreds of growers growing this plant. We’re reinvigorating it with new marketing this year,” Bill says. That was a calculated move.

“We wanted it to prove itself before we branded it,” he says. “When we introduce a new variety, we operate by saying, ‘Let’s figure out the plant first and then put a clear message around it.’ It became obvious, over the years of retailing and trialing, that the landscape is the message.”

They’re debuting a new branded pot, branded tag and signage for landscape wholesalers and for garden centers. They’ll run an ad campaign directed at growers and landscapers. “People are starting to ask for it by name. It’s time,” Bill says.

Branded pots are becoming more common on retail shelves. Bill says, “I hate to sound unkind, but sometimes you walk into a garden center and it looks like a garage sale. There are so many different types of pots in different shapes, sizes and colors.” Branded pots make a big difference at the point of purchase, particularly for a strong individual product with good name recognition. They also help reinforce the idea that a single annual plant is worth a premium price.

“During the last few years, garden centers have started to realize they’re in the retail business, and if you have a nice package, you sell more. We are getting better, as an industry, at selling.” **GP**

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