

Features

8/30/2016

Behind the Variety: Proven Performer

Katie Elzer-Peters

Echinaceas are outstanding plants for retailers because almost everyone knows what they are. While they may not know the name, they see them everywhere—around shopping malls and office parks, at the entrances to neighborhoods—and that recognition helps when they go shopping at the garden center. Over the last decade, colorful hybrids have flooded the market and they're almost irresistible for a coneflower fanatic. I have, though, as have many others, been burned when these bright beauties don't come back in the spring. Makes a gardener a little gun shy.



Darwin Perennials saw an opportunity in the market to breed beautiful coneflowers that do have great vigor and hardiness. The result was the Sombrero series, eight colorful hybrids in shades of white, yellow, fuchsia and burgundy, regularly hardy to Zone 4a and with excellent stability of growth form and habit.

Karl Batschke, Global Products Manager for Darwin Perennials, says, "The Sombreros are part of a broader breeding project that was started 15 years ago by our sister company PanAmerican Seed. At that time, the perennial market was gathering a lot of steam. We had a feeling that there were opportunities to take this popular and common prairie plant and improve it."

At the same time PanAmerican was breeding, the new, aforementioned cultivars from other programs were hitting the market and problems with hardiness and sustainability were becoming apparent. Karl says, "The objective for PanAmerican was cross a variety of species in order to come up with echinacea varieties that would grow from seed, fit a modern garden, wouldn't be too tall, would have nice bright colors and would be hardy."

During the process, they actually developed a unique technique in echinacea breeding for which they secured a utility patent. They were particularly excited about the flower placement and numbers. "There were some great forms where the petals overlapped, giving a flat-showing bloom. Usually with coneflowers, the petals curve down and you can't see the color if you're looking at them from above," Karl says. In 2008 they selected 50 to 60 plants to trial. The resulting series of eight plants is all tissue culture-propagated now. Seeds might have been the goal and origin, but in order to maintain the stability of habit, form, color and hardiness, the

series is maintained through tissue culture.

In 2011, Darwin introduced the plants to retail. “At that point, we had given them time in the field to ensure that the plants were winter hardy, came back true to type, and had the same branching habits and large, flat flowers the series would be known for,” he notes.

Growers love the series because they can be planted in spring and sold to retail the same season.

“Historically, hybrids in reds and yellows would need to be planted in the summer, allowed to bulk up and fill out the pot during late summer, allowed to go dormant and then be sold next spring.” This is a problem, Karl says, because “echinaceas are not reliable when overwintering in pots. Growers can see huge losses.”

Retailers capitalize upon this opportunity by receiving brightly colored plants for the post-spring boom. When shelves are clearing out in June and July, Sombrero Echinaceas are just getting started. They also have excellent shelf life.

“While we hope that retailers don’t have to hang onto plants for too long, in the summer they might sit for a while. Sombreros will have 15 to 20 flowers on the plant at a time, with individual flowers lasting up to a month. This gives the retailers longer to sell through while the plants are still looking good.” **GP**

Katie Elzer-Peters is a garden writer and owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a marketing and PR firm handling mostly green-industry clients. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com or at www.thegardenofwords.com.