

Guest Column

6/1/2024

Nurturing Growth: A Thoughtful Approach to Plant Selection

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As a family owned greenhouse and garden center in Jackson, Georgia, our commitment to excellence in plant selection is both a tradition and an evolving process. With over 45 years of growing experience, selecting plant material to grow and sell is not only a science, but an art. We leverage all three generations in selecting plants for our grower-retailer greenhouse operation.

Using data is key to develop a plant-selection strategy; having over 45 years of experience truly helps. My grandmother and business founder Dottie Collier has

seen a vast range of plants come through the greenhouse over the years; some varieties have come and gone, while others remain steadfast. A lot of changes are due to customer feedback, trends that come and go, or plant performance.

Pictured: Three generations of Colliers (from left to right): Tony Di Rito, Kelly Di Rito (holding Ruth Di Rito), Dottie Collier (founder of Collier's) and Samuel Di Rito.

Identifying Customer Preferences

The key asset to our growing and plant selection strategy is the timely customer feedback we can obtain almost daily by interacting with our customers. This is achieved by having those conversations with customers on what plants they liked in previous years, what did well or what didn't do so well in our area.

Another easy metric is visual feedback. As a grower-retailer we have a growing area and a dedicated retail space that we have to keep stocked with plants for our customers. Annotating what varieties or species need to be restocked is a big factor in what's needed to be increased in years to come.

An example that really sticks out in our selection of annuals is the black blooming vegetative petunias—our customers love the unique color and purchase not only one, but multiples at a time. In our vegetable plants, customers love to see the starts/transplants that we start on property and we can't keep them in stock—from squash to cucumbers to beans and watermelon.

In contrast, we tend to not order or grow as many plants in the varieties that we have to discard at the end of the year. As social media has positively impacted our business over the recent years, we've been able to speed up that process and even source plants that we don't grow for our customers in season. The key is understanding and meeting our customers' needs. We actively seek and consider customer requests, valuing their input in shaping our inventory. By aligning our offerings with customer preferences, we foster a stronger connection with our plant community.

Watching & Learning

To remain at the forefront of the industry, we closely monitor both local and national trends. This has been achieved in meeting directly with our plant suppliers in person and online, as well as dedicating time to learn from other growers, retailers and educational institutions. As we continue to expand and grow, we've attended industry trade shows like Cultivate and previously attended numerous others like the former Southern Nursery Association show.

In 2023, I had the honor to attend my first Cultivate show; seeing all the new varieties was really exciting, coupled with spending some one-on-one time with our Ball sales rep Nathan King. At that show he showcased the new Passion Fruit Lantana with its vivid colors and trailing growth habit. It excited us and our customers, surpassing our initial expectations so much that we've reordered liners for a later crop due to extremely high demand. In a visual industry that's growing and selling plants, I feel this is a great way to connect and select new varieties and absorb the latest industry information. For any business owner or manager, I would highly recommend investing in attending at least one industry trade show or conference to elevate and expand your plant offerings in addition to gaining critical industry knowledge.

Covering a Wide Market

While collaboration is key, we leverage all three generations to help us in our selection process, from selecting the next in trending houseplants to the old-time favorites. This allows us to serve the wide customer base that we strive to invite into our greenhouse. We hope to have plants for everyone, whether it's a rare or trending houseplant for the small apartment owner, the first-time homeowner who's looking to landscape their new yard or the large farmer who loves a specific heirloom tomato variety.

The recent challenges posed by COVID prompted a re-examination of our approach. Adaptability became paramount as we navigated supply chain disruptions and changing consumer behaviors. We've even seen in the years leading up to COVID the industry has shifted to more of the grab-and-go mentality. Customers are looking for instant gratification—or as we like to call it, quick color. This has led to a big shift from smaller plants that we grow in trays like 606s that the customer will take home, plant and watch grow through the season to the emergence of the large mixed baskets and combo pots that are full and colorful at the time of purchase.

As a grower-retailer, especially in USDA Zone 8 (previously 7b), this has sped up our growing season by bringing in liners and planting seed earlier to grow fuller and bigger plants in the heated greenhouse space to have those items as full and beautiful as possible for when the freezing winter weather breaks.

In conclusion, our plant selection process is a delicate balance between data-driven insights, customer engagement and staying attuned to market trends. The cohesion of decision-making, adaptability to change and unwavering commitment to quality define our approach. As we move forward, we embrace the ever-evolving landscape, ensuring that the lush offerings reflect not only our family's traditions, but also the aspirations of our plant community. **GP**

Samuel Di Rito is a third generation Collier, grandson of Dottie and the late Ray Collier, founders of Collier's Greenhouse and Garden Center located in Jackson, Georgia. Sam grew up in the family business, stepped away to attend college at Auburn University, where he majored in Biosystems Engineering, followed by service in the United

States Navy prior to his return to the family business. Sam was honored as a finalist for the 2023 Green Profit/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award.