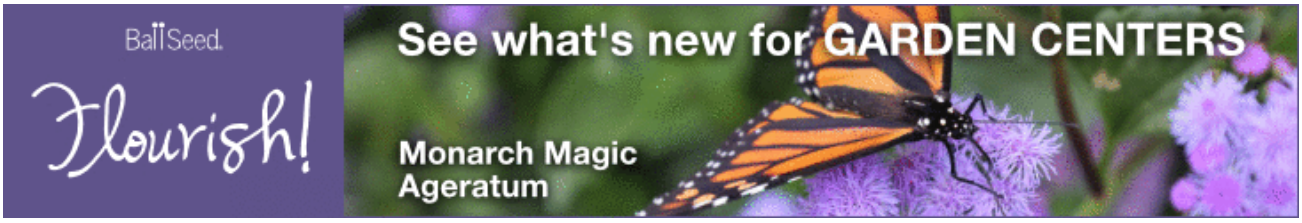
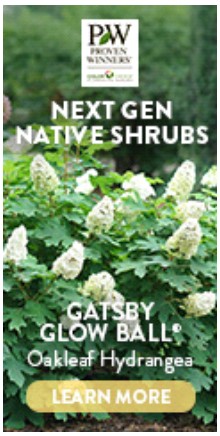
Growing Media 2025, Garden Trends, Irrigation Survey & More



News and commentary for the nursery & landscape market

GROWERTALKS MAGAZINE greenPROFIT MAGAZINE

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2025



subscribe

Nursery & LANDSCAPE INSIDER

News and Commentary for the landscape and nursery market

COMING UP THIS WEEK:

Growing Media 2025
Garden Trends for 2026
Autumn Kiss Encore Azalea
Any Low-Tech Irrigators Here?

Growing Media 2025

Every two years, the global substrates community gathers for an international symposium to explore advances in growing media and soilless substrate science. This year, Growing Media 2025 was hosted at the Weihenstephan-Triesdorf University of Applied Sciences in Freising, Germany. It was an absolutely fantastic week filled with informative lectures, technical tours, cultural events and, of course, all the substrate science you can handle.

I know I talk a lot about my experiences and the meetings I attend, but I have to say this was hands-down one of the most relevant meetings I can remember. Nearly every talk the entire week was incredibly informative and on point. I can't remember a meeting where all topics covered were that relevant.

The main focus of this meeting was the future of global substrate science. We spent a lot of time covering exciting topics of physical and chemical characteristics of growing media, wood fiber, substrate modification and more. However, what set this meeting apart was the opening plenary session on "Beyond Peat." The meeting started with a workshop to explore the global pursuit of identifying peat-reduced and peat-free substrates.

Four speakers were selected (including myself representing the U.S.): Chris Blok from the Netherlands, Thomas Schmidt from Germany, and Raghavendra Prasad from the UK. We each shared a roadmap of how researchers in these individual countries are leading the pursuit of these goals. The most exciting part is that without knowing, we'd all developed similar strategies to solve this challenge. A truly fascinating indicator of our similar goals.

The plenary session provided insight to the future of global substrate research.

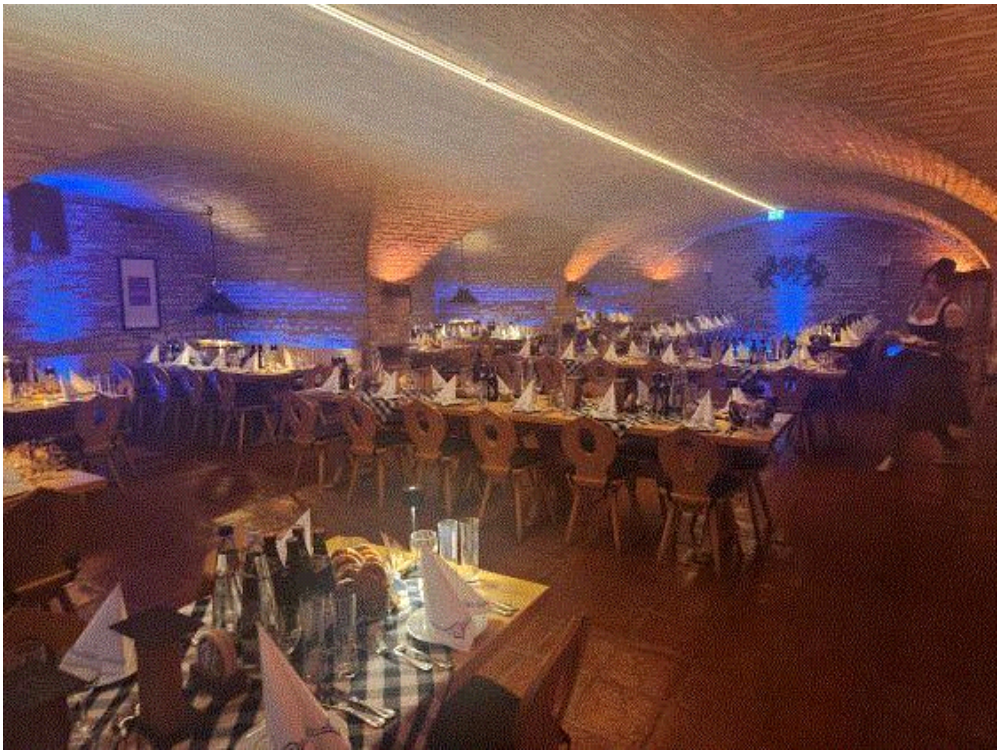
They also hosted a conference-wide workshop to identify solutions from several angles that will serve as a springboard to support the global substrate community as we move into a new paradigm of substrate science.

We vistied Paludiculutre, which is the study of growing in restored peat lands.

From there we had several technical tours, including stops at growers, composting facilities, substrate developers and research labs, all providing an insight into the German growing media industry.

The wood fiber substrate research in Germany is truly impressive.

I had an absolutely wonderful time—as I always do. My favorite part of this meeting is the people. The substrates community is such a fantastic group of like-minded individuals who get together to support each other's research and collaborate to ensure that our research field continues to advance with time. More than that, we always have a good time together, and the town of Freising provided a perfect opportunity. In fact, just adjacent to the campus is the world's oldest brewery, Weihenstephan. Located atop a hill with an amazing overlook of the countryside and campus, we were able to debrief from the day's lectures over a fantastic German pils! What a better way to end the day. We even got a special reception with the authentic Oktoberfest fares in the basement lodge—such an incredible added treat to cap off the week.



Setup for authentic Oktoberfest in the world's oldest brewery!

I am so looking forward to Growing Media 2027 in Athens, Greece!

Who would have thought that growing media could bring so many wonderful people from across the world together?

Garden Trends for 2026

Every year the Garden Media Group releases their annual Trends Report. This year marks the 25th anniversary of this report, which forecasts what's coming next in the gardening world. Like always, it's full of information and insights on how culture, climate and consumers are shaping our industry.

This is such a thorough report—it took me a bit to digest all the information. I would highly recommend you checking it out for yourself. However, I'll be happy to give you the lowdown on what I think was the most exciting pieces. You can almost taste the cover, with "lemonading" as the annual theme. I like the idea of optimism—as the saying goes, "When life hands you lemons …"

As I moved through there were some things that clicked and seemed intuitive, but I hadn't actually tried to consider, and there were some surprises along the way. I fully thought the color of the year would be a vivid yellow, with the lemonading theme.

Several trends exist, including purpose-driving and precision gardening. I love the concept of a "personal museum." I also have to admit, when I first saw the concept "bark"itecture I was hooked. (But, honestly, that's because I was thinking pine bark.) However, pet gardening is a really neat concept. Plants and designs that make spaces more inviting to pets is a no-brainer. With the changing consumer habits of spenders—i.e. less children, more pets (no source for this, just my guess)—this makes sense.

The report is free to download HERE.

Autumn Kiss Encore Azalea

Autumn Kiss, the newest release from the Encore Azalea collection, won the 2025 Cultivate Retailers' Choice Award. I've highlighted Autumn Kiss in this newsletter before, as it's absolutely gorgeous. However, I through it would be fun to include this press release into the newsletter because we get insights from the breeder, Mr. Buddy Lee. When I was in Louisiana, I always enjoyed visiting Buddy's farm and seeing all his projects. It was incredible to have such a talent for plant breeding just down the street. Now, it's nice to see his insights into the development of this award-winning cultivar.

Below, Robert "Buddy" Lee details how Autumn Kiss was developed, what sets it apart and what's next for the Encore program:

What was the development process for Autumn Kiss?
I've been looking at this particular plant for about eight to 10 years. My process involves following a promising plant across generations, selecting from seedlings and ensuring that the traits I'm most excited about are stable. Finding a winner means striking the right balance; choosing traits that will catch consumers' eyes on store shelves, demonstrate strong propagation and performance for growers, and deliver the resilience landscape professionals rely on.

At what point was Autumn Kiss recognized as a particularly promising variety?
With Autumn Kiss, as with most of the plants I breed, it wasn't love at the very first bloom. But as it matured, that first spring brought this incredible blast of color and it flowered so vigorously it almost looked as though it had been greenhouse-treated. My growers started sending me pictures saying, "Look at this!" That's when it clicked. And when the plants weathered an extremely cold winter without burnt stems, the variety earned its place.

Success to me isn't simply about bloom power; I like to give my plants a few years to prove themselves. A particularly standout quality of Autumn Kiss is its vigorous roots; it anchors itself quickly in the native soil and thrives, which to me is the mark of a great plant.

Describe the unusual bloom color on this variety.
The blooms are 3- to 4-in. across and have a light pink to white center with a darker pink edge and a crepe-paper texture. In spring, the bloom hues are more intense; in late fall, they're softer. The center petaloids are a solid, saturated pink, which is where the "kiss" name comes from—they look like pink lips. Its massive spring bloom is spectacular, but even sporadic blooms are showy because there's so much complexity to the bloom hue.

What makes this variety appealing to retailers and industry professionals?
For retailers, the "wow" factor of the blooms helps this variety stand apart on the rack and its compact size is what consumers are looking for right now. For landscaping professionals, it's frankly a pretty tough little azalea. Autumn Kiss establishes itself well into garden soil or a raised bed, and it makes for a gorgeous container planting. It also doesn't need much pruning to maintain, and it has excellent heat and environmental tolerances.

Are there hidden strengths to this variety?
Most people call it a dwarf, but I'd say it's more of a mid-dwarf, topping out at 3- to 4-ft. Autumn Kiss has a strong, healthy root system, which allows for better pest tolerance, leaves that hold their glossy shine in full sun and resilience against environmental stressors. It doesn't produce many long shoots and stays neat and mounding, making it a versatile, tidy little plant.

What can we expect in the future from the Encore program?
Looking ahead, I'm focusing on traits like leaf color and fragrance—projects I've been working on for years that are now showing promising results. As a plant breeder, sometimes your imagination runs ahead of reality, but that's part of the fun. I'm exploring new leaf colors, different flower forms, more intricate color patterns in azaleas and even stronger plants overall. I have so many goals, but they all branch from the same start: the search for a beautiful plant that performs.

Any Low-Tech Irrigators Here?

I'll close this newsletter with a request from some colleagues at the University of Florida who are working on a project exploring the use of automation in nursery production. This team, led by Dr. Laura Warner, is seeking to learn more about barriers to adoption and how to support growers with transitions into more automation. If this is you, or you know someone who might be interested in participating, please share the below message.

Seeking interview participants!

Are you a nursery grower in the United States who doesn't use irrigation timers?

Are you responsible for making decisions around your nursery?

If these criteria fit you then the national Labor, Efficiency, Automation & Production (LEAP) grant team wants to interview you! We need your insights and thoughts on automated technologies, and specifically, irrigation timers.

The national LEAP Nursery Crops Toward Sustainability grant team is exploring ways to help growers make the best choices about automated nursery technologies. This information will help those who serve the U.S. nursery industry better understand your views of and preferences of these automated technologies and inform education initiatives on automated technologies.

If you match the criteria above and are willing to participate in a 40- to 60-minute interview, please Email Us and we would love to set up an interview at your convenience. If you have any questions, we would be happy to answer them.

General information about the LEAP project can be found at nurseryleap.com. Thank you for your time and consideration, and we look forward to hearing from you!

Think big,

Jeb Fields
Editor-at-Large
Nursery & Landscape Insider

This has been received by 31,755 of the hardest-working horticulturists in show business!

If you're interested in reaching 32,182 clients who eagerly await every *Nursery & Landscape Insider* and surely read every word, contact **Kim Brown** ASAP and she'll hook you up.