

Features

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Behind the Variety: Making History

Katie Elzer-Peters

Sakata is throwing a big birthday party for SunPatians this year. In 2016, the plant line turns 10, and to celebrate, Sakata has released four new varieties: Compact Orchid, Compact Fire Red, Compact Tropical Rose and Spreading Pink Kiss.

The SunPatians series was introduced to the market in 2006, at which point, New Guinea impatiens varieties had already been in cultivation for a little over 30 years (introduced in 1972). To break through to consumers, SunPatians had to be different—easier for production greenhouses to grow, easier to market and offering better home garden performance.

It all started with the breeding program. The germplasm that serves as the foundation for SunPatians' trademark tolerance (and, even, an ability to thrive) in a wide range of garden conditions, including hot sun and pounding rain, originated in Indonesia. Mark Seguin, SunPatians Project Manager, says, "While exploring the botanical diversity of Indonesia countryside, members of Sakata's R&D team discovered some impatiens (there are over 1,000 species within this genus) growing under adverse conditions. Although these wild plants were flowering sparsely and the plant habit was less than ideal, they recognized the potential, integrating characteristics the plant was demonstrating into commercial product lines might offer."

Sakata penned an agreement with the Indonesian government to allow use of the Indonesian native genetics for development of the SunPatians line. This agreement developed in line with the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), in collaboration with the Indonesian Agency for Agricultural Research and Development (IAARD), for access to its native resources.

The CBD is an international convention that, according to their website, "Was inspired by the world community's growing commitment to sustainable development. It represents a dramatic step forward in the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources." As a result of the agreement, Sakata pays a portion of SunPatians royalties to the Indonesian government and shares materials developed during breeding. This arrangement is relatively unique in the horticultural world, despite the fact that breeding materials are often collected from countries other than those where commercial development happens.

Eight years of breeding produced the first retail offerings. Mark says, though, "Development of SunPatians

did not end with its introduction in 2006. Since then, the color range has expanded and we've continued to improve and refine plant habits in the line."

Their compact SunPatiens offerings have been especially popular. "Because of their long blooming cycle and ease of growing, impatiens are among the most popular and beloved bedding plants sold worldwide. A severe outbreak of downy mildew, however, had a devastating effect on the performance and availability of traditional impatiens in the marketplace," Mark says, adding, "Growers and consumers alike looking for alternatives that could provide the same continuous, worry-free blooming discovered that SunPatiens were not only resistant to the disease, but also provided both sun and shade versatility. Many gardeners who may not have otherwise considered SunPatiens in their traditional plantings began to try them."

That was a win-win for growers and retailers. "Retailers love SunPatiens for their strong sell-through and customer satisfaction rates. Additionally, SunPatiens is constantly adding new colors to the lineup to keep the series new and exciting," Mark says. "Because SunPatiens can thrive in nearly all environments, customers love them and return year after year to ask for them by name."

Sakata reinforces the brand recognition with consumers by providing a full line of branded pots and POS materials, and maintaining an active social media presence and consumer-facing website to interact with gardeners and provide information. **GP**

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To learn more about SunPatiens, visit <http://sakataornamentals.com/topcrop/SunPatiens>.