

## Features

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## Welcome the Newbies

*Bill Calkins*

With a new crop of plant buyers hooked and looking for more, it's on us to inspire creativity and success.

Among the many things learned during 2020 it became very clear that many people bought plants for the first time and are beginning to catch the gardening bug. All you have to do is look on Instagram or Pinterest to see the new fervor in high-resolution color. Most of the pics show thriving plants, but not all. Social posts give us the ability to see how plants perform when people bring them home and not all pics are pretty.

It's sort of like when people post pics of their kids and pets. Most are cute and adorable, while others show cats covered in ripped toilet paper, dogs chewing shoes and crying faces terrified of Santa. Dead and dying plant pics can be sad, but also can serve as encouragement for our industry to work harder to ensure success or at least provide a fighting chance for our newest customers.

So many of the plants we sell are bulletproof or, at the very least, have high potential for success. These are the plants we need to direct our newbie shoppers towards, explaining the tips and tricks we all know so well.

How to encourage success through proper care and feeding is another topic for another article, but this time let's focus on some low-risk, high-reward selections. Chances are you won't need to change your spring order, but merely cull through the benches and identify high-success-rate plants.

After you make a list (definitely make a list that you can add to and reference from year to year), talk with your entire team and find out their favorites for guaranteed season-long performance. Here are a few to start you off:

One of the best plants for rookies is Dragon Wing Begonia. They grow quickly, get huge, bloom continuously and thrive in dry, wet, sunny, shady, and just about any situation. They look great in baskets and containers, as well as in gardens. Dragon Wing is the perfect plant to sell to newbies to fuel the fire and passion that's starting to build.

Supertunia Vista Bubblegum Petunia is another that rises to the top of the new gardener list. It's vigorous, covered in blooms and is a showstopper wherever it's used. You can see Vista Bubblegum baskets from the end of the block, and they become conversation pieces when friends and family visit. This is a truly Instagram-worthy plant and one that you can recommend with confidence.

While we're talking petunias, who can argue with Wave as a fantastic starter plant for first timers looking to fill beds with high-powered color. With about 1,000 colors available (slight exaggeration) in the different families ranging from medium to huge, plant decorators will always find the right Wave for their garden. When the brand calls out "easy spreading color" they're telling the truth and giving you a simple selling point.

The editors at Ball Publishing love sedum and especially Lemon Coral. Loving heat and dry soil, this is a perfect pick for newer shoppers who tend to abuse plants. Ignore Lemon Coral and it still flows with super-bright color and can be used in multiple applications in gardens and on patios. Kids especially love this weird and wild succulent. Sell it to folks with busy lives, but a sense of style.

It's difficult to call out specific coleus varieties because the new breeding is so fantastic. With an endless array of patterns and foliage shapes, building a display of sun and shade coleus will be easy and can be a perfect place to send rookies in search of artistic, but easy-care, plants. Pick the larger-stature varieties because what we've learned from social media this year is that size is important to newbies. When Redhead came to market, Pinterest was just taking off and this variety dominated the gardening category. First-timers feel successful when plants grow to their waist and there's no lack of big coleus out there.

Another popular social media movement is capturing birds, bees and butterflies interacting with plants in gardens and big patio pots. Attention to nature and habitat gardening isn't new to those of us in the fold, but is definitely super-exciting to new gardeners. There's no better multi-purpose pollinator than salvia. And thanks to new breeding, there are more and more colors to choose from each year—blooms and stems. Offer dark-stem selections and blooms of all hues to fit the tastes of newbies and be sure to call out the wildlife selling points. Then sit back and watch the excited posts when the first hummingbird arrives.

It's easy to get excited about selling the newest genetics, but don't forget about the classics. Many new shoppers grew up in mom and grandma's garden, and have fond memories. Zinnias, sunflower, carnations and geraniums can trigger memories. Remind them of their childhood by building displays using traditional plants with retro signage. There's a lot of opportunity bringing back the old-time favorites. The reason they're still around and selling big numbers is because they work. And that's the name of this game.

Finally, vegetables. This can be a bit tricky because not all are easy and can be frustrating when weather isn't ideal or garden conditions aren't optimal. Patio varieties might be a good bet for new veggie gardeners. Focus on easy care and high yield. New disease-resistant breeding and compact plants producing large amounts of fruit are good picks when putting together collections. Tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers are the obvious choices, as well as assortments of herbs. Help guide shoppers through the growing process, but don't overwhelm them. Sell them what they need for success and encourage them to read up on tips and tricks online.

This isn't a comprehensive list by any means, but it's meant to get you thinking. What are the plants you can sell to encourage and ensure success? How can you help fan the flames that ignited in 2020? It all starts with variety selection, like always. When these new plant parents visit your store this spring, it's time to welcome them with open arms and help them fill carts with plants they can nurture through the year and post amazing pics all summer long. **GP**



*Pictured: Little Napoli Tomato is bred to be the perfect size for patios and small spaces while still providing lots of yield*  
*Photo Credit: PanAmerican Seed.*

*Pictured: Lemon Coral Sedum is a tough plant that survives in lots of settings. Photo Credit: Proven Winners.*

*Pictured: Dragon Wing Begonias thrive in the landscape, and in containers and hanging baskets. Photo Credit: PanAmerican Seed.*

*Pictured: Calliope Dark Red Geranium is a great example of a newer, tougher version of a classic plant. Photo Credit: Syngenta Flowers.*