

ofa All Industry

What Sprung at Spring Trials

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In April we saw another spectacular show from a cornerstone of the floriculture industry – the California Spring Trials, formally known as Pack Trials. How can you summarize an experience such as the Spring Trials? As always, there was stunning plant material along with a variety of marketing programs, hard goods, and services on display. With 36 locations, there was no shortage of innovative products and interesting ideas, though it is impossible to recall every detail from each location. The Spring Trials create a crystal ball from which you can see where the floriculture industry is headed over the next 1, 5, or even 10 years! As the OFA group headed from south to north and the Purdue-Cornell-University of New Hampshire bus tour headed north to south, here are some of the trends that caught our eye.

It's All About the Show

It would be impossible to visit any one of the 36 trial sites and not notice that companies are breeding and marketing for great visual impact. For anyone with deep gardening roots, the expansion of color selection (Dümmen's 'Cappuccino' Potunia®) and opportunities for wide choices in size (Pan American's 'Gryphon' begonia; Figure 1) and form (Tomaccio™ tomato from Hishtil) make you wonder if you are gardening on the same planet.



Figure 1. Pan American's 'Gryphon' begonia has outstanding foliage and stature.

Flower and foliage color was being used to convey mood, compliment decorating scheme, and connect to causes. The color scheme theme, which dates back to the 1980s, was taken to a new level. Syngenta featured the color wheel, and one can "Spice it up with Orange" using impatiens, begonias, calibrachoa, gerberas, and lantana, in addition to the standard marigold (Figure 2). Those with a keen decorating sense can do a lot with Ball Flora Plant's 'Black Velvet' petunia and its cousins 'Phantom' and 'Pinstripe'. These petunias definitely caught our Boilermaker eye for Purdue black and gold (Figure 3, page 14)!



Figure 2. Syngenta demonstrates how color can successfully be used as a marketing tool.

If you have done any home improvement projects in the last 10 years, you likely have noticed that plant colors and names are now as varied and creative as those used for paints. Westhoff introduced 'Voodoo Red Star' verbena, more descriptive than what might have been called 'Red and White

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Figure 3. Ball's 'Phantom' petunia can dress up a container, especially if your school colors are black and gold.

Stripe' in past decades (Figure 4), and Fides' Margarita 'Sunset' osteospermum tries to do justice to the combination of bronze and yellow displayed by its petals. Which mimulus would you rather purchase, 'Dark Red' or 'Kissable Dark Red'? Ball is betting on the latter. These highly descriptive names are a marketing tool, but also do justice to the complicated breeding work it takes to produce these plant marvels.

Foliage can be just as fetching. Succulents were well represented, and are a varied and practical group with much potential. Proven Winners has a Retro Succulents™ line of over 50 cultivars. Queen™ Wildflowers™ (Greenex) had an interesting succulent display, also noteworthy due to their demure size. I can picture one sitting on my desk.

Even pots have become colorful, as a way to brand and make product stand out as variety expands exponentially. There is the pink container associated with Wave® petunias at Ball, the lime green with Dümmen's Potunia® petunia (Figure 5a), and the deep blue of Fides' Hypnotica® dahlias (Figure 5b). These containers help sell. Color can be used as a marketing tool well beyond the underskirt for a petunia or dahlia. Ecke is breeding non-traditional euphorbias with pink bracts that can be marketed in promotions supporting breast cancer awareness.



Figure 4. Westhoff's unforgettably-named Estrella verbena 'Voodoo Red Star'.



Figure 5a. Dümmen chose pot color as a way to help their Potunia® line stand out from the crowd.



Figure 5b. Fides' Hypnotica® dahlias have a hypnotic container as well.

Size Does Matter

Coleus is not the only annual that has been supersized. Dümmen displayed 'White Night' bacopa and 'Magnum' New Guinea impatiens that showed almost more flower than foliage (Figure 6), as did the Patchwork™ collection impatiens from Ball.



Figure 6. Dümren showcased its Magnum series New Guinea impatiens sporting unusually large and showy flowers.

Judging by Takii's F1 Royal series, gerbera flowers have gotten big and showy, too.

Bigger is not always better; do not underestimate the "cute" factor. Helianthus, including Syngenta's 'Constellation™' and 'F1 Sunny Smile' and 'Big Smile' from Takii, are less than 20 inches tall. 'Sunny Smile' can be produced in small pots under short days and marketed at just 6 inches for impulse sales. Schoneveld Breeding displayed the 'Allure' cyclamen Super Series® Micro, which fit in the palm of your hand (Figure 7). Similarly, Kieft-Pro-Seeds offers a Mega or Mini Revolution® gerbera. No more one size fits all.

The range of available sizes was also noticeable. Speedling offers its line of vegetables in multiple sizes, to fit every budget. Jiffy also demonstrated this, from Preforma® plant plugs to 11-inch diameter Jiffypot®s with multiple sizes in-between. The availability of cultivars, containers, and production schedules to produce and market plant materials over a range of sizes allows for customization for the myriad of growing operations.

Making Combos Easy

One consistent theme seen throughout Spring Trials was making combination pots easier for everyone, from the grower to the consumer. For the grower, the most popular product was multiple cuttings rooted in a single liner. The pioneer in this area is Dümren, with their Confetti Gardens. Others are now offering similar programs, including Syngenta's Kwik Kombos, Ball®



Figure 7. Schoneveld Twello breeds cyclamen of varying flower and foliage color, and also size.

FloraPlant's Patio Ensembles, Hort Couture's® Ready to Wear™, and Selecta's TrixiLiner™ (Figure 8). Oro Farms' new Combos Made Easy program is focusing on providing combinations that grow well together and have similar PGR requirements but also appeal to consumers. Oro will provide the "planting recipes" of the top-rated (by growers and consumers) combinations to growers to ease combo planning, planting, and production. These programs, whether finished liners or un-rooted cuttings, provide an advantage for growers who traditionally put together their own containers. By ordering the combinations they won't find one plant out of the combination out of stock or unavailable.

The pre-packaged combinations are not only for vegetatively-propagated plants. PanAmerican Seed was displaying their new Fuseable™ program (Figure 8). Similar in functionality to the Confetti Liner, Kwik Kombos, and TrixiLinners™, Fuseables™ are a single pellet containing seeds of complimentary material such as multiple cultivars of either one species or three different species. The pellets can be sown then transplanted, providing a simple seed-propagated mixture of species for flowering-combo



Figure 8. Having trouble with mixed containers? Here is a selection of the combination liner and plug products offered.

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containers. This allows plant material to grow together from the beginning and gives combo planters a natural look. In addition to flowers, the Simply Salad Fuseable™ line contained multiple types of lettuce seed pelleted together, providing an instant and simple containerized salad mix!

In addition to making combination planters easier for the growers, there were some programs designed to make combination planters easier for the consumer who wants to design their own. Both Master Tag and Goldsmith were promoting programs for use in garden centers to simplify container design and construction by consumers. Master Tag's Container Creations uses color coding to identify which plants are upright, mounding, or trailing, ensuring customers include all the structural elements necessary for a good mixed container. Goldsmith had a similar program called Make It Simple, which identified plants as having a focal, filler, or cascading habit that corresponded to a planting pattern on display next to the plant materials.

Hort Couture® offered what must be the simplest instant container program ever for consumers - Easy 1, 2, 3. This program includes container designs, branded as Cities of Fashion, grown in a 14-inch container similar to a hanging basket. However, it had a large hole in the bottom of the container allowing consumers to “pop out” the fully grown plants as one large mass by pushing up through the hole and planting it in the final container (Figure 9). This produces a container that looks completely filled-out immediately after planting!



Figure 9. Hort Couture's® Easy 1,2,3 planter is ready to be planted by the consumer in a large patio container.

Eco-Friendly Products, Plants, and Marketing Programs

Sustainability was a recurring theme again this year at Spring Trials. We saw several examples of sustainable and eco-friendly products from packaging to plant material to marketing programs. Jiffy® was promoting their new Plant In a Jiffy® program (Figure 10). By starting plants in Preforma® liners, slipping the liner into a paper sleeve with a tag attached, shipping them in wax-coated paper trays, and providing customers at the garden center with a paper carrying case, they aim to largely eliminate plastic from



Figure 10. Jiffy's® Plant In a Jiffy® program is striving to eliminate plastic from the entire production chain.

propagation to purchasing. Ball® was showcasing their biodegradable containers. These compostable and biodegradable pots include the OP47 pots made of wheat byproducts and rice hull pots, which featured a new plantable version with slotted sides to allow roots to grow out into the soil after planting. Western Pulp's® recycled paper and wood pulp ReCreation® pots were also on display at Ecke, straying from the natural brown with a hip new green color. The Eco tags by John Henry® offer a large selection of tag materials, so growers can choose something that works for their program. These tags are produced from a variety of materials, including recycled plastics, corn, recycled paper, and wood pulp (Figure 11).



Figure 11. John Henry's® Eco tag products displaying a range of materials for tag production.

In addition to sustainable containers and other products, we saw new breeding directed toward reducing inputs for growers and homeowners. Ecke was promoting the new Eck-O Collection™ of plant material that offers sustainable solutions by reducing:

- 1) the need for PGR applications;
- 2) irrigation requirements;
- 3) energy inputs by growing well at cool temperatures; or
- 4) overall inputs due to a short bench time.

There was also plant material being promoted as sustainable due to the minimal irrigation requirements in the landscape or container. Selecta's 'Soleil Purple' petunia is a new Wave-type, long-day cultivar that thrives under minimal irrigation in the landscape. Plug Connection®, among others, had succulents from many genera on display. These succulents offer season-long color for landscapes and containers while reducing the need for water.

The eco-friendly marketing “buzz” centered on the John Henry Company's Bee Friendly program. The colorful, eye-catching merchandising products can be used by retailers to promote bee-friendly plants and products (Figure 12). The program will coincide nicely with DisneyNature's 2011 pollinator-themed movie. Ecke's Polar Bear Poinsettia marketing program donates a percentage of the profits back to Polar Bear International, a group dedicated to the conservation of polar bears through research and education.



Figure 12. Grab the attention of Generation X and Y with colorful and eco-friendly marketing programs such as John Henry's Bee Friendly program.

Marketing programs such as these have the ability to generate interest from the elusive Generations X (ages 29 to 49) and Y (ages 18 to 28). A recent Pew study reported that these generations volunteered more than previous generations and expected companies to contribute to communities and cause-related campaigns. Generation Y, specifically, has grown up recycling and using post-consumer recycled products so they're a bit more eco-friendly than Generation X, but both groups still expect and respond well to eco-friendly efforts. What's going on

in your own community (Relay for Life, March of Dimes, etc) that you could support for the well being of the community and at the same time connect with community-savvy and eco-friendly Gen X and Yers?

Technical Support, Production Recipes, and Cultural Information

One trend that caught our eye was on product-specific grower support which provides services similar to that offered by your local land grant University Extension Service. Ecke was one of the first to dedicate resources to grower support with its web-based Tech Help Bulletin Board, featured at the Ecke Techie Cafe. This year Syngenta introduced their integrated Technical Services Team, which brings together the collective expertise of S & G Flower, Syngenta Horticultural Services, and the recently acquired Goldsmith Seeds, Fischer, and Fafard (Figure 13). The team is composed of experts in disease diagnostics, substrates, biological and chemical controls, and plant genetics. One part of the team works with growers and brokers, while the other is focused on technical communications, research, and development.



Figure 13. Harvey Lang explains Syngenta's Tech Services to the group.

As a grower, do you wish you could find a recipe card that included media, PGR, pH, insecticide, fungicide, and sales recommendations for new plant introductions or even new cultivars? Dream no more. Breeders at Spring Trials are now providing very detailed cultural information about the newest members of their catalog family. For example, Syngenta had production and culture information adjacent to their plant material that indicated which media, pH, plant protection, PGRs, and biological controls they recommended for each species or series (Figure 14, page 18). At the Ball® Spring Trial site, culture research posters were placed next to the corresponding crop (Figure 15, page 18).

Marketing Programs Go Hi-Tech

It seems that nearly everything is becoming cell phone compatible these days – applications exist to scan barcodes to find the lowest prices, to recognize and identify songs, and to serve as a GPS system. 10-20 Media's recent launch of GardenPilot is one of the first efforts to tap into this market. The John Henry Company recently went one step further by creating an AllRecipes.com marketing program (Figure 16, page 18).

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Figure 14. Plant production and sales recipes simplify growing and selling.



Figure 16. John Henry's partnership with AllRecipes.com utilizes the design, packaging, and plant information strengths of the John Henry Company with the strong online (365 million visits per year, an average of 1 million per day) and household name recognition of AllRecipes.com.



Figure 15. Which PGRs work the best on the newest cultivars? Ball® has done its research and shares this with Spring Trials visitors.

Partnering with leading recipe web site AllRecipes.com, the John Henry Company vegetable marketing program includes cell phone-scannable quick read QR tags (Figure 17) that allow the user to find and download recipes using that particular vegetable. This is a coordinated way for retailers to reach of the 25- to 44-year-old crowd where vegetable gardening is most popular (Source: GWA's Edible Gardening Trends Research Report).



Figure 17. John Henry's AllRecipes.com marketing program utilizes QR Codes that are scanned or read by cell phone cameras. These QR (quick response) Codes store web site URLs and other information.

Merchandising – Back to the Basics: Color and Simplicity

A well-executed merchandising display by Syngenta used the color wheel with vignettes of white, yellow, orange, red, plum (purple), and pink. The displays combined plants with indoor and outdoor décor and lifestyle products such as grills, lanterns, and furniture (Figure 18). Don't think customers shop by color? How many customers have frequented your garden center and asked for plants that bloom a specific color? Chances are those customers are women who are also the primary buyers and influencers on décor items. Even if you don't have room in your store for a large display, consider two or three smaller displays that highlight color trends or show off your high margin items.



Figure 18. Syngenta's color vignettes combined showcased plants with everyday items such as picture frames, pottery, lamps, and other décor items.

While not the focus of a display or marketing program, there was a noticeable effort at the Spring Trials locations as well as the local independents we visited to keep it simple but well-signed. We witnessed clean and simple displays showcasing plants or products in a way that allowed for ample space between each (Figure 19). The keep-it-simple theme extended beyond plant displays into gardening products (Figure 20) and information stations.

If it's hard for you to keep it simple with all that inventory, consider creating a showcase to promote new, unusual, or outstanding plants (Figure 21, page 20). This type of display could be themed around color, shape, size, use, water requirement, flowering time, historical use, or simply your staff's top picks (just like the displays you find at a library or Blockbuster).



Figure 19. Clean, organized displays with ample space show off the product and allow for easy shopping



Figure 20. Customers are often overwhelmed by choices, especially less experienced gardeners. Simple displays with basic products and information help customers make decisions and often provide inspiration to try a new plant or product.

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Figure 21. Ever visit the local video store, library, or wine shop and see a “Staff Favorites” display that showcases items with brief signage about what makes that item a favorite? Try that on a small scale in your own store. Just make sure it’s signed well and rotates on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

Independent Garden Centers vs Big Box

A visit to Home Depot and Rogers Gardens revealed three quick observations Independent Garden Centers (IGCs) can use to their advantage. The first is to capitalize on and promote the knowledge and passion of your employees, and don’t forget the length of their tenure or years of gardening expertise (Figure 22). From visits at the California Home Depot, four Central Ohio Home Depots, and two Central Ohio Lowes stores, it is apparent they’re offering the basics and they are trying to do it well. This gives IGCs a good place to differentiate by offering new and unusual plants and products and top-notch customer service. Lastly, a Home Depot employee mentioned that the big orange box is shying away from variety in its plant offerings, wanting to focus instead on larger quantities of basics plants to better serve the independent contractor/landscaper.



Figure 22. This is a good example of how to toot your own horn. Showcase your knowledgeable staff with their picture, name, and maybe a little about their gardening experience, specialty area, or favorite plant.

In the Trend Spotlight: Succulents, Edible Fruits and Vegetables, and Farmers Markets

While their low-water usage, drought-tolerant benefits were not heavily marketed, the presentation and space devoted to succulents was an attention getter. Then again, so was the \$250 price tag on a very cool hanging succulent ball (Figure 23). Even at the local level in Central Ohio, succulents are given space in highly visible areas, most noticeable at Lowes, which has a program that assists in the self-creation of a succulent container garden by identifying the structural and focal plants and appropriate ways to mix them.



Figure 23. Succulents are hot! We’ve been seeing them all over the place at IGCs and big box stores and many are commanding good prices.

Similar to eco-friendly initiatives, edible fruits and vegetables and farmers market-oriented marketing and merchandising were very prevalent throughout the trip. Some new twists included mixing vegetable plants with flowers in containers (Figure 24) and up-selling strawberries in attractive hanging baskets (Figure 25). Closely tied to edible fruits and vegetables were multiple versions of farm market marketing messages and displays (Figures 26a, b, c). To easily put these types of merchandising into play, use crates and simple signs to give your display that farm market feel.

Though it is difficult to summarize an event like Spring Trials, certain themes and trends were apparent. It is clear that companies are trying to further develop their products with added value for growers and consumers alike. To support the ever-increasing number of varieties being grown, breeders are



Figure 24. Mixed containers have been popular for several years. With the gaining popularity of edibles and urban gardening, it seems like a no-brainer to mix flowers and veggies together in an attractive combination.



Figure 25. A unique container plus a functional, yet pretty edible plant equals added value for the customer and higher margins for you!



Figure 26 a, b, c. Using a farm market theme to merchandise and market plants is growing in popularity and is relatively easy to accomplish. Or take it one step further and see about organizing a farm market in the parking lot of your garden center.

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supplying growers with unprecedented information and resources. Sustainability is here to stay, as evident in not only the hard goods such as tags and containers, but also with plants that grow well with fewer inputs. Creative and successful plant combinations are becoming more common with the products available to growers and the point of purchase marketing designed for consumers. As always, the plant material was dazzling, displaying broadening variety of both color and texture to synch up to current fashion trends. While we hope this gives you an idea of what was happening this year and in following years, with any luck we'll see you on the Spring Trials trail next year!

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ofa Interior Plantscape

Controlling Your Costs

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Every business needs to price its products and services to be competitive yet profitable. In fact, even in today's economy, you can simultaneously increase your profits and win more sales in competitive bid situations.

Your pricing is strategically important, and to set your pricing successfully, you must know your true costs of doing business. Most accounting systems will track expenses such as materials, labor, and marketing. For interior plantscapers, front-line employee labor and plant materials for replacements are the two largest direct costs. In fact, your largest expense is most likely your payroll for horticulture technicians. One of the most impactful ways to decrease labor expenses is to transition most of your accounts to a 14-day service cycle. This will have a significant and immediate impact on your bottom line. The transition can be tricky and has its own set of problems, including scheduling changes, surprised clients, and the very real possibility of needing to lay off or re-assign front-line staff. You may need outside help to guide you through the process.

Your largest materials cost is likely plant replacements. These costs can be decreased through improved training, proactive quality control programs, outside workshops, and careful purchasing. You may also need to institute certain control measures to track where your plants are going.

Once you've been able to manage direct labor and plant replacement costs, your next step should be to closely evaluate your overhead expenses and see where you may be able to save money. Remember, every dollar saved in overhead equates to

fewer expenses, higher profit margins, more "wiggle room" in negotiating bids, and more money in your pocket.

Here are a few areas you may not have thought about where overhead can be significantly decreased:

Hire carefully and keep your best employees happy. You will spend, on average, \$6,000 to \$8,000 to recruit, hire, train, and equip every new employee you hire. Before you start looking, evaluate your business/contracts to see if you really need to hire someone new or if the responsibilities can be split up, assigned to someone else, or outsourced. Check references and consider having a potential candidate go with one of your seasoned techs for a few hours (being paid as casual labor) to gauge their interest, skills, and ability to do the job. Spend your resources wisely and be as certain as you can that you are hiring the right person for the right job.

Watch your worker's comp insurance premium. Your worker's compensation insurance can easily cost thousands upon thousands of dollars in premiums every year, not to mention how much an injury will cost you in terms of a valued employee and the resulting interruptions in your business. Each time an employee has an accident it drives up your premiums for several years to come.

Start an employee-based safety committee and investigate each and every accident that occurs, whether or not there were any claims or injuries. Have a back-to-work program for injured employees to get back to work as quickly as possible, even if they are only filing or stuffing envelopes for a couple hours a

