

PLANTS ON TRIAL

Comparable to the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, All-America Selections is an excellent resource for building your customer's confidence in the plants you carry.

By Diane Blazek

After a recent explanation of the All-America Selections (AAS) trialing program and subsequent awards, I was hit with this response: "Oh, so the All-America Selections award is a lot like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval or the Underwriter Laboratories Classification."

This person immediately "got it" when it came to what AAS is all about. Additionally, I realized he had just given me a quick and easy way to explain the program to others. To clarify the statement, we did a little research about the other organizations and their processes then compared it to the AAS trialing process. These statements are excerpted from the respective websites:

Good Housekeeping: The purpose and mission of the [Good Housekeeping] Institute is to serve the needs and interests of the homemakers and homes of the United States. The facility includes test stations where the work is conducted under practical household conditions. Any product that withstands the investigation and experience of the Institute staff is eligible to be included in the list of "Tested and Approved" products.

Underwriter Laboratories: Mission: Working for a safer world since 1894 by advancing safety science through research and investigation and by supporting the production and use of products which are physically and environmentally safe.

All-America Selections: To promote new garden seed varieties with superior garden performance judged in impartial trials in North America. We will test new, unsold cultivars, we will inform gardeners about the AAS Winners and we will earn gardeners' trust in the AAS Winners.

In other words, all three organizations (Good Housekeeping, UL and All-America Selections) test products in a neutral setting, rate those products and then assign their respective awards or designations to the products that have met their rigorous set of standards.

Getting Judged

Currently, AAS has 70 judges in more than 32 states and provinces throughout North America. These judges are professionals in the field of horticulture and range from breeders to academia to commercial growers and others. All the judges generously volunteer their time to plant, observe, analyze and score the new plants that are entered into our program each year.

When breeders choose to enter one of their new and previously unsold cultivars, they select one of four categories: Bedding Plant, Flower, Vegetable or Cool Season Bedding Plant. The judges are asked to score on very specific traits or improvements for each plant, as observed in the garden setting. For example, of interest to the home gardener, the judge might be asked to evaluate uniqueness, flower earliness, better productivity or improved taste for vegetables. These are just a few of the many qualities for which an AAS Winner might be evaluated.

After the growing season and scoring tabulation, all the entries with scores that meet our criteria are approved as possible AAS Winners. Only after the breeder has met seed quality and quantity standards can they accept the award. Then the promotion and marketing of that AAS Winner gets underway.

The Verdict is In

Good Housekeeping uses their own magazine and website to promote the products they've deemed worthy of their Seal of Approval. All-America Selections is very lucky to have the support of the trade publication editors, garden writers, garden bloggers, extension agents, university personnel, radio show personalities and more, to help spread the word about the AAS Winners. This publicity helps raise the awareness of these specific varieties and drives consumers to ask for them by name.

Another component of the AAS marketing program is our group of 180 Display Gardens. Every year, these public gardens (such as Dallas

Getting Results

All-America Selections and the University of Georgia recently announced the creation of a web based National Plant Trials Database, www.PlantTrials.org, that will serve as a repository for data from participating flower trials throughout North America initially — with options to expand globally.

In the future, brokers, growers and retailers will be provided access and will find the data repository extremely useful when analyzing which varieties to choose for their businesses.

Programming for the database is underway and the 2012 trial results will be the first ones in the database.

Arboretum, Denver Botanic Gardens, Missouri Botanical Garden, etc.) receive the seed of the past five years of AAS Winners. They grow these plants and put them on display with the appropriate AAS signage to show the millions of garden visitors how the AAS Winners perform in a garden setting. A list of both the Display Gardens and Trial Grounds can be found on the AAS website, www.aaswinners.com.

Point of Purchase Provided

Another well-timed update at All-America Selections is the launch of our new website, www.aaswinners.com, that coincides with the celebration of our 80th anniversary this year.

Especially valuable to garden centers, extension agents, public gardens and others are the downloadable and printable signs, brochures and presentations found in the "Signs and Brochures" section on the new site. These tools are there for anyone interested in explaining the AAS Trialing process and/or promoting the AAS Winners to their customers. **LGR**

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