our attention to what will be a week of warm, sunny days spent looking at beautiful flowers, visiting with old friends and eating cookies...three of my favorite things to do.

We've been busily setting our schedule, making reservations and trying to figure out how to fit more hours in each day. So maybe that's why when I received editorial advisory board member Jack Williams' comments about the February issue, I immediately connected them to Pack Trials.

Jack was commenting about Stan Pohmer's column last month (differentiating yourself from the mass merchants), agreeing that it is really important for independents to differentiate their product. But Jack immediately started thinking about his own position in marketing for a major U.S. breeder and said how interesting that statement was when applied to plants. As Jack rightly pointed out, all breeders strive to create plants that are beautiful, floriforous, early, etc., etc., and they also aim for tough plants that can take abuse from the consumer. Consequently, those same plants can often take a lot of abuse at retail and tend to do better for mass merchants than do more tender plants.

Just a side effect? I doubt it, but maybe. Until last year, we almost never saw plants that were marketed directly to "volume" production, i.e., mass merchandisers. But several of last year's introductions took aim at that market, understanding what they would be giving up by doing so.

Now, before anyone gets bent out of shape about breeders favoring large producers over small ones or mass merchandisers over independents, let me say I think this is a great development, that is, as long as the breeding machines continue to turn out product for both markets. True, it does put more pressure on independents to have outstanding quality. After all, if the plants are hardier and will look better at the box store, good isn't good enough for you to charge a premium. But it's also true that as breeders focus on some crops, others get "left behind" as specialty or hard-to-grow, and those plants have your name written all over them. You *own* premium, hard-to-grow and specialty. And that doesn't just mean unusual. What about a really vigorous vinca or trailing petunias in 1-gal. instead of 4-inch? Specialty doesn't have to be weird.

Just think about it, if we can know where the boxes are going with their marketing and what products they're going to carry, we can make sure to be bigger, better, more expensive and worth it.

ARE YOU GOING?

Which brings me right back to the California Pack Trials. The Pack Trials are the perfect venue to see for yourself which plants you can hang your hat on and which ones everyone will have, to see how a commodity plant can become premium, to really differentiate your plants from the box down the street.

I know that leaving the garden center right now will be pretty hard. If you can't make it and still want the information, we'll cover the trials in the magazine, but nothing beats making your own evaluations. Don't miss out on this opportunity. For contact information to make your appointments, turn to page 62.

Bridget C. White

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