

TREKKING THE TRIAL



From Encinitas to Gilroy,
we traveled the coast
to bring you the latest news
from the California Pack Trials.

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Back in the March issue of *Lawn & Garden Retailer*, we advised you to “Pack it up and Head West” to the industry event known as the California Pack Trials. “Are you waiting until the last minute to place your orders with growers?” the article asked. “If your order placement procrastination stems from the fact that you don’t yet know what the new varieties are, don’t wait for growers to let you know...you can find out for yourself at...the California Pack Trials.”

Held every April in California, the Pack Trials is kind of like a multi-location open house. Bedding plant, perennial and cut flower breeders from around the world join their local peers in hosting the top growers, brokers and other assorted allies for the most important two-week event in wholesale floriculture. Pack Trials showcases the newest plant introductions, marketing programs and anything else the breeder companies want to get before their customers (wholesale growers) and ultimately end consumers.

For those of us who attend the Pack Trials every year, it’s a great opportunity not only to view new plant introductions but also to discover annual and year-over-year trends. Since many independent garden centers don’t make it to the Pack Trials, here are a few of the major trends we saw this year.

QUALITY, QUALITY, QUALITY

Your head might spin with all the new plant introductions every year — 1,200 in 2001, 1,000 plus last year and nearly the same this year — but one definite consumer benefit has come out of the competition: quality genetics.

Especially on staple crops such as pansies, impatiens and petunias, competition at the breeder level has become quite intense, with an increasing number of companies vying for the same piece of the pie, so-to-speak. At well over half of the 30 companies participating in Pack Trials, you could see examples of the most popular bedding plants, and all looked perfect.

Verbena. The new ‘Tapien Pure White’ is winter-hardy, mildew-resistant and has lacy, fern-like foliage. Pure White blooms April-November and needs full sun and moist soil. Suited for both containers and landscape, Pure White tolerates cold and hot climates. Suntory. (800) 877-6737. **Write in 1538**



The breeders have even started to acknowledge their competitors' quality in these areas. Instead of talking about their vast superiority, company representatives highlighted subtle differences, color range and garden performance, as indicated by superior performance at annual university and award trials.

VEGETATIVE REVOLUTION

As has been the case the past few years, breeders continue to focus on this popular and lucrative "new" market segment. The rise of Proven Winners in the early 1990s started this trend, and if the number of new offerings in vegetative annuals is any indication, the vegetative invasion should continue for some time in the future, as breeders continue to introduce new species and fill out existing series.

Species that were previously unheard-of in the United States, such as calibrachoa, nemesia and osteospermum, have now become garden center staples. This year, breeders seemed to be more focused on stabilizing, improving and filling vegetative genetics than on introducing a plethora of new species, though there were some new favorites such as Bodger Botanicals' agastache Acapulco series or Cohen's double verbena Corsage series.

Given the decreased number of "new" crops at this year's Pack Trials, there was some speculation about the industry or the trend having hit a plateau. According to the breeders, this is not the case. Breeders report having many new series in the pipeline and continuing their focus on vegetative annuals, if not increasing its intensity.

HERBS ANYONE?


Hard to believe that an old category such as herbs would be a trend, but it seems to be. We saw herbs everywhere this year. From a proliferation of lavender to decorative herbs for multiple uses, it seemed like herbs were showing up in some of the most unexpected places. Instead of using traditional greenery in mixed containers, many breeders were substituting herbs and vegetables, including decorative kales, mustards and cabbages. There were also some impressive monoculture hanging baskets of herbs such as oregano or thyme.

It seems that breeders are actually investing money in herb development, by cleaning existing stock for uniformity and performance and by introducing newer, more ornamental herbs that can be used for both culinary and decorative purposes. And especially for this latter group, the price points are very good.

MARKETING POTENTIAL

Though Pack Trials was originally designed to introduce new varieties and compare existing ones, this year focused a lot on showing customers the marketing potential with these new varieties and companies.

You've seen it too, branding and marketing has become more important than ever. Whether it be Proven Winners or The Flower Fields and P. Allen Smith, consumers are relating to these brands they keep hearing about on television and seeing in the newspaper.

Even commodity items, such as chrysanthemums, are getting in on this trend. Royal VanZanten, the largest mum breeder in the world, is marketing Showmaker, a new line of indoor and outdoor potted mums, which will most likely interest consumers as they try to find flowering plants to have inside. 

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Agapanthus

Lily of the Nile 'Snowstorm' is a new, patented, white agapanthus that flowers an average of 70 days per season and has an abundance of tall scapes topped by white flowers. When mature, it bears up to 100 umbel-topped stems per plant. It is a compact grower, reaching only 27-30 inches tall. Hardy in USDA Zones 9-11. Great for fire-resistant borders. Anthony Tesselaar, USA. (310) 349-0714. **Write in 1502**



Delphinium

'Darwin's Blue Indulgence' PPAF has chunky racemes filled with large, triple-layered flowers in a rich blue-pink color. Plants grow to approximately 40 inches tall, bloom from June-August and are hardy in Zones 4-8. Darwin Plants. (888) 224-5008. **Write in 1505**



Brachyscome

'Hot Candy' is a large-leaved form with a very dense habit. The bright pink blooms have a yellow center and are immune to hot weather conditions. This plant is hardy in Zones 9-11 and grows to approximately 6-10 inches tall. Hot Candy works well in beds, 4-inch pots, hanging baskets and combination planters. EuroAmerican Propagators. (888) 323-0730. **Write in 1507**

Zinnia

At 6-8 inches tall, Benary's zinnia Zinnita series works well for annual borders and mixed containers. The fully double flowers bloom to 1½-2 inches, and plants have a well-branched and globe-shaped habit. Colors in the series include Orange (shown), Rose, Scarlet, White, Yellow and a Formula Mix. Ernst Benary of America Inc. (815) 895-6705. **Write in 1506** ▶

