



Pick of the Pack Trials

Varieties, marketing and more...
the best the 2005 California Pack Trials had to offer.

**By Carrie Burns, Catherine Evans
and Bridget White**

Enough though the California Pack Trials were shortened from two weeks to 10 days, there are more plants to see, people to greet, questions to ask and snacks to eat than you can possibly do. During our nine-day trip, we stopped at 20 exhibit sites and saw more than 750 new introductions. Needless to say, we were tired of flowers by the time we boarded our plane and headed home. Two months later, though, we are just as excited about the Pack Trials as we were on the first day, so sit back and relax as we tell you about some of the best new introduction and latest trends from the 2005 Pack Trials.

MORE THAN PLANTS

With so many new plant introductions every year it all starts to run together: another shade of red geranium, an impatiens that is a quarter of an inch shorter or another day-length "neutral" petunia. So for many of us the best part of Pack Trials has become identifying emerging trends in the industry. Of course, that's not saying we didn't find lots of plants to get excited about (read on for some of our favorites). Just that there are other things going on at Pack Trials besides the plants, and if you are like us and you want to see what's up in the industry before you get down to the real work of selecting which new varieties to trial, then we've got all you need.

MARKETING TRENDS

After years of marketing, marketing and more marketing, it was nice to see the companies take a little break this year. That's not to detract from Proven Winners' (PW) display of new ways to use their brand at retail or Ball FloraPlant's reinvented Simply Beautiful, which includes new tags, labels and POP materials to support the new tagline "Expect Success." But what we saw this year was a switch from everyone generating brands to programs that solve problems, whether that's by extending a season, choosing plants or making gardening easier.

Both PW and Fischer USA capitalized on this trend by developing marketing programs to extend the traditional spring season. PW's Spring Magic consists of frost-tolerant plants that are ideal for early season sales. Spring Magic is a limited collection of blooming and colorful plants offered in mixed containers only to Gold Key and select grower/retailers. Despite its great tag, which sits above foliage and carries the tagline "Take me outside I'll survive" and what will undoubtedly be stellar advertising

support, PW is going to have an uphill battle with this program, both in training gardeners to shop this time of year and in convincing them to buy plants with a 4- to 6-week lifespan. Fischer's Beat the Heat collection is a little simpler. It is composed of heat-tolerant plants that will thrive in the hot and humid conditions of late summer. Sold under the Goldfisch brand, tagging includes a Beat the Heat sign, but the program was designed to help growers identify which plants to grow this time of year, not make consumers buy more plants.

Living Décor is a new program from PanAmerican Seeds that aims to turn standard seed items such as sunflowers, coleus and marigolds into impulse gift items. The idea is to sell cute, miniature plants, usually in multiples such as six celosia with small cones, in decorative containers. All crops for the program have a 21-day lifespan, even under interior low-light conditions, and are very eye-catching. Since most of the plants are grown atypically, you will need to coordinate this program with your grower, but the effort will be well worth it. Living Décor has low input costs, could bring a high margin and had everyone at Pack Trials talking.

Probably the most unusual new marketing program this year was Gardening For Dummies. Yes, this is the same brand as the popular books and has been licensed by broker H.F. Michelle's for application to plants. Pots, bench tape and tags will carry the recognizable Dummy logo, and a booklet explaining how to be successful with the newly purchased plants will be given to customers at purchase. The line will include only easy-to-grow, tough plants such as seed geraniums, vinca, petunias, etc. We were excited to



Top: An unsung trend this year was the seed companies focusing on lifestyle vignettes. Pictured here is American Takii.
Left: Proven Winner's Spring Magic program hopes to start the season earlier. **Right:** One of the more spectacular varieties introduced this year, 'Giant Spinner Pink/White' from Bodger Botanicals was the talk of the trials.

see a floriculture company looking outside of our universe for ideas but remain a little skeptical about whether the brand will actually extend to plants. After all, the promise of the Dummy brand is that it takes a complicated subject and makes it easy; we're not sure a booklet will do that, but kudos for trying. You can't succeed without trying. Given the cost of the license and the target customer, this program will probably go to a box store, but we thought you might want to know what your competition at the boxes is up to.

CROP TRENDS

The most notable crop trend continues to be vegetative suppliers filling in their product lines in hopes of becoming a one-stop shop. Practically everyone now has the "vegetative basics:" osteo, nemesia, diasca, petunia, calibrachoa, etc. Even Fides North America, which had been a potted plant company, has added snapdragons and calibrachoa and might be moving in this direction. This means that the most numerous introductions this year were vegetative crops such as petunias, verbenas, geraniums and New Guinea impatiens. We didn't notice a single vegetative company that failed to add at least some of these standards.

In talking with growers at the Pack Trials, we heard mixed reactions about the idea of a one-stop shop. Some hoped that buying more product from one supplier would give deeper discounts; others said the introductions would not sway them from what they already know. One thing is for sure, the genetics are getting substantially better in vegetative crops, and while we have a way to go before we reach the standard set by seed, it's getting harder and harder to jump into the game with just any old genetics.

On the seed side, we saw the seed companies break out of a several year slump and offer a wide array of interesting crops. This year, we saw everything from pansies and impatiens to aquilegia and grasses, and many companies that offered just two or three new varieties last year showed 10-20 this year. True, there were plenty of two-day-quicker petunias and 3-mm-shorter violas, but for the most part, the seed crops were real improvements this year.

As far as specific crops, probably the most numerous (other than standards) was osteos. For the second year in a row, everyone seemed to be introducing osteos. Fischer introduced the Tradewinds series, Cohen Propagation Nurseries introduced the Serenity series and Selecta First Class introduced the Kenai series, not to mention that PW, Ball and Selecta all added varieties to existing series. There were at least 25 new osteo varieties introduced just this year, with an emphasis on the interspecific Symphony type. This is a great crop that often brings high margins, and the breeding emphasis is welcome, as many of the older series are variable and vigorous.

The other popular crop this year seemed to be vinca. We've been watching more companies jump on the vinca bandwagon, and this year might be the high point, with at least four companies introducing new crops. Fischer introduced a vegetative vinca, Nirvana, that is supposed to be aerial Phytophthora resistant (read on for more information). Floranova introduced two new series, Sun Devil Extreme and Viper, aimed at the bedding and landscape markets, respectively. S&G Flowers was showing a little improvement on last year's big hit from them: the Sunstorm series. Lastly, between its three series, PanAmerican showed nine new colors. That's a lot of vinca!

There were a few notable crop oddities in this year's exhibits. Everyone was talking about Bodger Botanical's Giant Spinner gerbera series. The flowers on these very vigorous plants are as big as 6 inches across. And while the flowers certainly grabbed attention, we couldn't help wondering about shipping and season-long interest. This is definitely one for grower/retailers and might even be best in mixed containers, as there is little interest to the plant when not in bloom. The other unexpected introduction came from EuroAmerican Propagators through the Proven Selections brand: foliage plants. Yes, you read correctly, Euro introduced banana plants and dieffenbachia. They are nice plants, but you could get practically the same thing on any street corner in Florida, so we couldn't resist asking why. You know Euro; they asked why not. With all the emphasis on tropicals it seemed to them like a natural extension to fill out their product line...here comes that one-stop shop again.

Other popular crops this year were diascia, with three new series and eight color additions; lobelia, with one new series and five new color additions; lantana, with two new series and four new color additions; and lots of perennials.

ALLIANCES

Instead of company alliances, this year we saw companies staying more to themselves. No major alliances were announced, and two companies were conspicuously marketing their own material instead of a competitor's. Ball introduced a line of calibrachoa from its own breeding instead of Kirin's, which is now marketed exclusively by its offspring Fides. Ecke Ranch has also replaced Goldsmith Seeds' vegetative verbenas, which are now marketed exclusively by Fischer under the Goldfisch brand, with newly acquired lines from multiple international sources.

The one possible exception might be Ecke and Sakata Seed America forming a closer relationship. As in the past, Ecke continues to market a large part of Sakata's vegetative material, and with Sakata recently hiring a former Ecke employee, Pack Trials was abuzz with speculation about a possible merger. The two companies stress that the personnel exchange is just coincidence and that the companies are just good friends, no merger in sight. Also, don't forget that Ecke is still part of The Flower Fields alliance with Yoder Brothers, while Fischer and Goldsmith have gone their separate ways.

The other interesting development announced at Pack Trials involved a clearer distinction between Twyford International and Fides. In the past, the two sister companies had divided genetics from parent company Kirin, with Twyford offering some of the products from tissue culture and Fides offering the others from cuttings. Now, the two companies are being divided along product lines, with Twyford offering foliage products and Fides offering color products. It's a much clearer distinction and will make marketing efforts and grower relations much easier.

CROPS TO WATCH

Throughout our Pack Trials trip we try to think like you — a garden center owner — by asking the kinds of questions we think you want the answers to: "will this have good sell-through, will it perform well for my customers, can I charge a premium for it, will it hold good, etc." When ▶



Left to right: Angelonia 'Serena Lavender Pink'; aquilegia 'Clementine Salmon Rose'; bracteantha 'Brilliance Yellow'; clematis 'Marie Louise Jensen'.

the three of us sat down to decide what we were going to cover from this year's exhibits we were overwhelmed with the possibilities and real improvements exhibited by some of the new varieties; choosing the following 13 was pretty tough.

And while we think these are the real stand-out varieties — the best of the best — there are many, many other varieties that we just didn't have space for. What we have chosen to highlight here are the new species, breeding breakthroughs and potential

best sellers. If you are looking for a truer shade of red impatiens or a larger flowered pansy, there were plenty of those introduced this year. Ask your grower, check out breeder/marketer Web sites or hit the local trial garden for more information.



Diascia 'Diamonte Apricot'

ANGELONIA

One of three first-ever introductions this year from PanAmerican Seeds, the angelonia Serena series is the first angelonia from seed to come to market. We've seen angelonia increase in popularity over the past few years, and a seed variety will be a welcome addition that can turn this expensive crop into a garden staple. With the lower cost of seed, you can afford to sell angelonia in premium packs, market it for landscape use or keep selling larger containers at a higher profit.

Serena is a compact angelonia, much like its AngelMist cousin, reaching a full garden height of 10-12 inches. It branches well to fill out 4-inch pots with only one plant or larger pots with multiple plants. Like other angelonias, the Serena series loves heat and take humidity well. It is available in Lavender, Lavender Pink, Purple, White and a Mix.

AQUILEGIA

Aquilegia vulgaris Clementine from Kieft Seeds is not your typical columbine. Sure it is a hardy perennial with delicate, colorful flowers and clover-shaped foliage, but that's where the similarities stop. Clementine is a new generation of columbine that is not afraid to turn its face to the sun. Its spurless, double flowers actually face upwards and bear a strong resemblance to clematis flowers, hence the name.

Because it has so many flowers, Clementine makes a great container plant, or you can simply market it with the other perennials. This is a refined plant that works best in 5- to 6-inch pots. Be aware that Clementine does need a cold period to initiate bloom, so it has a defined sales period; however, its flower power gives it a good shelf life. Available in White, Rose, Red, Blue, Dark Purple and Formula Mix.

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Heliotrope 'Basket Marino'

BRACTEANTHA

The Brilliance bracteantha series from Bodger Botanicals (breeding by Benary) is one of those crops that made all of us say wow when we walked into the greenhouse. It should have since they have been working on this series for 2½ years to get the right habit. Brilliance features large, bright flowers that sit naturally on top of the foliage, making for the presentation we've been waiting for in this crop. Bracteantha will always be something of a marginal crop, but perhaps with such a nice presentation...

Two colors make up the Brilliance series: 'Brilliance Yellow' has golden yellow flowers, and 'Brilliance Lemon' has pastel yellow flowers. Both are excellent for 6-inch pots and grow to 20 inches. Extremely high light will stress plants and may yellow foliage. Regardless of its good genetics, even this plant will stretch with excessive moisture, low light and over-fertilization.

CLEMATIS

Proven Selections added a clematis line, available only through Pleasant View Gardens, to its offerings this year. And while the colors and flower shapes are not the most unusual, we couldn't help being excited to see the PS marketing might get behind this old favorite. With its classic white pot and custom black trellis, which locks onto the pot for easy carrying, clematis never looked so good.

The four varieties in the series originate from tissue-culture and vary in size and shape. 'Climador' reaches 3½ feet high and continuously flowers from June to September with 5- to 6-inch, purple-blue flowers and nearly black anthers. 'Marie Louise Jensen' reaches 6-8 feet high and also

blooms June through September with double, blue flowers that measure up to 6 inches across and anthers that darken with maturity. 'Pink Climador' reaches 3½-4 feet high and has flowers with pink petals and contrasting dark anthers. 'Ruutel' reaches 5-6 feet high with large 6-inch, red

flowers that have dark sepals and nearly black anthers.

DIASCIA

The second of PanAmerican's first-ever introductions for 2005, Diamonte is the first seed diascia on the market. It offers many of the same benefits as Serena angelonia

— cheaper inputs, a larger market and more format possibilities — only for early spring or late fall. Diascia is not a warm-weather plant.

Diamonte has a nice, mounded habit and is covered with small flowers when in bloom. It works well in a premium pack or small pot and sells well alongside ►

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pansies. Final garden height is 12-14 inches. Available in Coral Rose, Apricot and Lavender Pink.

HELIOTROPE

Heliotrope is not exactly a revolutionary crop; it's been around forever. Still, we heard quite a few rumblings during our trip about

Selecta First Class's 'Basket Marino' semi-trailing heliotrope. That's right; it actually mounds and trails instead of standing upright. According to Selecta, this is the first trailing heliotrope on the market. 'Basket Marino' also received high praise in Selecta's post-Pack Trials survey. And that was enough for us.

'Basket Marino' makes great 4-inch pots but looks best in hanging baskets. It is a profuse bloomer, so much so that the vivid violet flowers often cover the foliage, and it emits a vanilla scent. Like all heliotropes, 'Basket Marino' can take the heat, but good air circulation and



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Top: Hibiscus 'Carafe Bordeaux'. **Bottom:** New Guinea Impatiens 'Kokomo Petite Salmon'.

proper water management are critical for healthy plants. Finish height is 6-10 inches.

HIBISCUS

With the popularity of everything tropical, we couldn't overlook an improvement on a tropical standard. Vintage hardy hibiscus from Yoder Brothers is composed of two series — Splash and Carafe. Splash contains two varieties: Pinot Noir and Pinot Grigio; Carafe is made up of three varieties: Bordeaux, Grenache and Chablis. According to Yoder, the Splash series is the shortest, most compact ever bred, with plants averaging 2½ feet tall. The Carafe varieties are a bit taller, averaging 3 feet high. Just imagine nice, thick plants that branch well and are covered with flowers; no lanky, out-of-control hibiscus here.

Flower size on all varieties is 9-10 inches, except Grenache at 7-8 inches. The one drawback to the series is that the flower colors are the standard white, red and pink we have seen for years, but there is more breeding being done. Hopefully, these introductions mark a new phase in hibiscus.

IMPATIENS, NEW GUINEA

This year, S&G Flowers made an interesting addition to ▶

Kokomo New Guinea impatiens. Complementing Kokomo XL, Kokomo Petite is just what it sounds like, small. It has small flowers and is more compact than Kokomo, but don't let its small size fool you. This New Guinea is covered with flowers and provides tons of color. The comparison

that comes easily to mind is pansies and violas. Smaller flowers but a better display. And the small flowers actually give this old standard a fresh new look. Definitely something to try.

Kokomo Petite works best in smaller pot sizes and should be planted a little more densely



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Top left: Leucanthemum 'Broadway Lights'.
Top right: Nemesia 'Poetry White'. **Bottom:** Ranunculus 'Maché Yellow'.

than a regular New Guinea. It is available in six colors: Orange, Rose, Salmon, Scarlet, Velvet Red and White. S&G informed us that they are working on even more colors.

LEUCANTHEMUM

Leucanthemum 'Broadway Lights' from Proven Winners got a lot of talk during Pack Trials. The beautiful flowers start out bright yellow and fade to a nice vanilla color — a great new color for this crop. The flowers are huge, and the plant is sturdy. It is a profuse bloomer, making for a continuous show in three different colors at one time.

This is naturally a fall crop and will be a welcome addition/complement to fall pansies and mums. 'Broadway Lights' can, however, be manipulated for early flowering, and it would make a great crop for any season.

NEMESIA

The last of PanAmerican's 2005 first-ever introductions, Poetry is the first seed-produced *Nemesia foetans* on the market. It is another cool-season crop that will work well with pansies or in

mixed containers. It has all the same benefits as PanAmerican's other new seed offerings — affordability, more format options and wider marketability. Poetry is available in the standard nemesia colors of pink, blue and white and should perform in much the same way as vegetative nemesias.

RANUNCULUS

If you're not selling ranunculus, you're missing out. Even though this spring-flowering annual has a short bloom window it makes a spectacular display, with large, densely-petaled, brightly-colored flowers. The new Maché series from Goldsmith Seeds (shown during the

Trials as Wizard) represents the first significant breeding work on this crop in years and should help it get some of the attention it deserves.

Maché works best as a flowering potted crop sold early in the season and will be a great draw for winter-weary customers looking for color. It is available as a color

mix and as pure yellow, the only solid color on the market.

SALVIA

'Mystic Spires Blue' salvia (*S. longispicata x farinacea*) from Ball FloraPlant is an 'Indigo Spires' type with a dwarf habit. One of the reasons we thought it was a

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good variety is because it is extremely free flowering, with large, true-blue flowers that cover the plant all season, perhaps even year-round in mild climates.

'Mystic Spires Blue' reaches a mature height of 12-14 inches. Its naturally compact habit makes it ideal for 1-gal. perennial pro-

grams. This is an old favorite that has been made even better through intense breeding.

VINCA

The new Nirvana vinca series from Fischer USA has been the talk of the town as far as vinca go. We remembered hearing about it

at Short Course last July, so we were excited to see it, especially when we heard Goldsmith breeders have been working on it for more than a decade. Marketed under the Goldfisch brand, Nirvana is a tough vinca bred to be aerial Phytophthora resistant. Though Fischer reported some



Top: Salvia 'Mystic Spires Blue'. **Bottom:** Vinca 'Nirvana Lavender with Eye'.

production problems back at the beginning of the year, they have assured us that those have been remedied, and the product should be in full supply for the 2005/2006 season. If the early university trials are any indication, this series might be the most significant advancement in vinca breeding to date.

A few pointers to keep vinca at its best: Nirvana thrives under high temperatures and relatively dry conditions, so a porous media that drains rapidly should be used. Low temperatures in combination with wet conditions will produce chlorotic or albino new growth, while older leaves may turn yellow.

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