

# Color Stacy's Perennially Successful

When merchandising your perennials, think color. As Stacy's has learned, a plant in flower immediately attracts customer attention and sells almost effortlessly.

By Gene H. McCormick



Salvia 'May Night'



Right: Merchandising perennials next to annuals fascinates customers and prompts buying. (Photos courtesy of Stacy's Greenhouses)

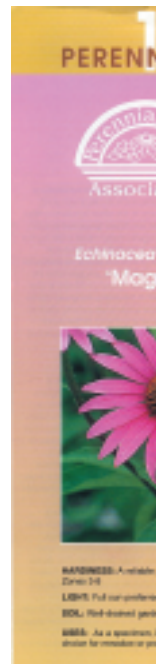
**G**arden center retailing has always been about more than just opening up the doors at a reasonable hour and waiting for customers to flock in with open checkbooks and a Martha Stewart recommendation. Marketing a myriad number and variety of live plants, and relevant accessories, season after unpredictable season to a fickle public through diverse economic conditions can be likened to driving to a strange city without a map or compass. You know where you are going, but are just not quite certain of how to get there.

Stacy's Greenhouses in York, S.C., is both a thriving wholesaler and a successful garden center, and while it regularly faces the same challenges as its peers, it has been able to make peace with major area chain stores on a wholesale level. It has firmly established its own garden center operation against the most stringent of competition.

## THE RIGHT MIX FOR SUCCESS

Located about 40 miles south of Charlotte, S.C. — the nearest major metropolitan area — Stacy's has been giving the public what it wants since 1971. There are no real secrets, according to Tim Brindley, vice president of operations, just implementation of good floricultural business practices. "Everybody's production quality has improved in recent years," says Brindley. "All the retailers around here, from mass-merchandisers to garden centers, offer good-quality plants. In order for us to continue to grow and maintain price margins to support growth, Stacy's has gone beyond just offering high-quality plants. All our employees understand the necessity of good customer service. They are trained to be informative and to offer extra-measure services such as design assistance. We also offer on-premises educational classes for consumers that have been very well-received. These services have helped us successfully compete against nearby discount retailers such as Lowe's and Home Depot, despite having generally higher prices."

Offering informed assistance is critical to Stacy's success, says Brindley, but equally important has been the live plant product mix, and product display, that it offers. "Annuals will always be very important to us economically, but price-wise the annual market is cut-throat. We have been having great success with perennials, which now account for approximately 30 percent of our live-plant sales. The profit margins for perennials are substantially higher than margins for annuals, possibly because of our Southern location. In the South, it seems annuals are considered to be a low-priced commodity by consumers, who tend to buy them by the flat. On the other hand, perenni-



als are viewed as a long-term garden investment. This may just be a perception on the consumer's part, but as they say, 'perception is reality.'"

**THE SECRET IS COLOR**

Stacy's retail operation spreads across seven acres: five acres of outdoor plant display space and about two acres of indoor area for plant foods, gifts and other hard goods. Perennials and annuals are similarly displayed in the outdoor areas with 3-tier step-ups designed by Stacy's. There is no difference in the signage for annuals or perennials. Nursery items are usually displayed on the ground.

"But it's not just how you display the plants," emphasizes Brindley, "it's the stage of growth you show that is critical. The number-one thing that appeals to our customers, by far, is color. Our customers come in looking for color. Space and plant size are important, as is the seasonality of the plants, but the big thing is color. That's why our featured perennials and annuals are shown in color. What looks best on a given day is what we feature, not green plants."

"Perennials have an advantage [over annuals] because they have a better shelf life," continues Brindley.

"They keep their color longer, require less care, less pruning and just less maintenance in general. This is just as important in our garden center as it is in the customer's home garden. When a customer walks in, they don't usually specify perennials. But when they see the perennials displayed next to the annuals, they are fascinated by the wide range of varieties and color, and wind up taking some sort of combo back to their gardens. Of course, there are a number of more knowledgeable gardeners who specifically ask for perennial varieties. Some of the most-asked-for varieties here would include *Albo marginata*, a hosta; 'May Night', a salvia that was the 1997 Perennial Plant of the Year; 'Goldsturm' Rudbeckia; and 'Magnus' echinacea, which is also a former Perennial Plant of the Year. I imagine that such a list will vary by region, but here in the Southeast, those are in high demand," says Brindley.

What works in the Southeast may not work in the Northwest, and what works for Stacy's may not work for a different garden center. But combining good service, and informative and educational assistance combined with a broad, lively, colorful product mix with good profit margins, is a formula for success no matter where or what size the garden center.

*Gene H. McCormick is president of McCormick Business Solutions Inc., Wayne, Ill., a business management company whose clients include the Perennial Plant Association. He can be reached at (630) 377-5517 or via E-mail at genebiz@earthlink.net.*



**PRODUCT POSSIBILITIES**

**Ornamental grass**

The new John Greenlee Collection features more than 25 ornamental grasses and plants that are easy to grow and maintain. Used as landscape or container plants, these new varieties unveil a constantly changing palette of colors from spring green to rich winter gold. A new favorite is *Carex flagellifera* 'Toffee Twist'. This sedge grass has slender, iridescent leaves that arch upward 1-2 feet before cascading back to the ground. Toffee Twist is ideal for rock gardens or along slopes. EuroAmerican Propagators. (760) 731-6029. **Write in 1517**



**Sanvitalia**

Sometimes called creeping zinnias, sanvitalias are lush growers that thrive in full sun. 'Sunbini' is free-flowering and ideal for baskets and window boxes. Covered with dainty yellow flowers, Sunbini can take the heat of summer and keeps right on blooming. Proven Winners. (815) 748-0805. **Write in 1518**

**Hemerocallis**

'Always Afternoon', a multiple award-winner, including the 1997 Stout Silver Medal, offers richly colored, deep mauve blossoms with a dark plum eyezone. Large, ruffled 5-inch blossoms are held on sturdy, well-budded, 22-inch scapes. Blooms early to mid-season. Tetraploid. Available as generously graded divisions of 2-year field clumps. Walters Gardens. (888) 925-8377. **Write in 1519** ▶



## Perennial Promotion Expands Gardening, Selling and Planting Seasons

The Perennial Plant Association (PPA) will, for the third year, be promoting the usage of perennials in home gardens and commercial landscape applications through its "June Is Perennial Gardening Month" campaign. Since its inception in 2001, the campaign has heightened awareness on wholesale, retail and consumer levels of the viability and advantages of planting perennials well beyond the traditionally accepted peak home-gardening months.

PPA Executive Director Dr. Steven Still emphasizes that the campaign will in essence "extend the perennial planting season, which will benefit floriculture from the plant producers to the retailers to the home gardener, who will be able to have an active, vibrant garden well into the late fall, early-winter months. A well-designed perennial garden can be colorful from April through December, month after month, year after year. The PPA feels that as the consumer market becomes more aware of the pleasures of stretching out the gardening season through summer and fall months, the increased demand for perennials will, in effect, give growers another turn or two. And garden centers will have an extended selling season."

The Perennial Plant Association is supporting "June Is Perennial Gardening Month" with promotion and point-of-purchase materials. For merchandising possibilities, contact Dr. Steven Still, PPA, 3383 Shirtzinger Road, Hilliard, OH 43026. He may be reached by phone at (614) 771-8431 or by fax at (614) 876-5238.



### Hydrangea

Bright chartreuse flowers make 'Limelight' hydrangea a standout. It begins blooming in late July to early August and remains showy through autumn, when the large blooms turn a rich pink. This is an easy-to-grow plant with reliable flowering and flower color, regardless of soil pH or winter temperatures. Flower heads are a good size, ranging from 6-12 inches, and are held upright on the shrub. Spring Meadow Nursery. (800) 633-8859. **Write in 1520**

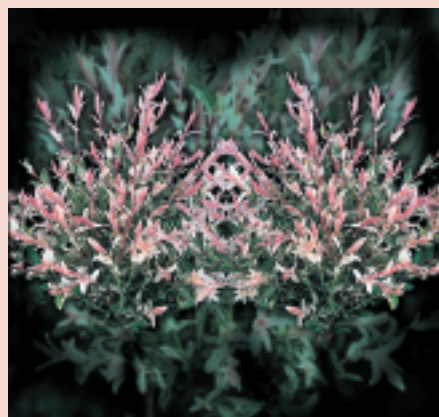
## MERCHANDISING THEMES

THEME NAME	CONCEPT	COMPONENTS	VARIETIES SUGGESTED
<b>Grandma's Garden</b> Old-Fashioned Perennials	Tried and true bloomers. Hang the laundry; pin the plant ID cards onto the clothesline along with some of grandma's best attire.	Clothesline Support Hose Apron Product ID Signs	Alcea, Aquilegia, Delphinium, <i>Dicentra spectabilis</i> , Gaillardia, Iris, Tall bearded, Lupines, Phlox, Tanacetum
<b>Zen Garden</b> Asian Theme	Feng Shui is very popular. Use some of your Asian influenced garden statuary for cross merchandising.	Statuary Pea Gravel Japanese Maple Product ID Signs	Grasses — Miscanthus, Carex, Hostas, Sagina subulata, <i>Thalictrum kiusianum</i> , Thymus
<b>Summer Time Fun</b> Mid Summer Bloomers	Get out the BBQ, tiki torches and pink flamingos. Build a display that is light-hearted and emphasizes the plants that will bloom at the peak of summer.	Tiki Torch Pink Flamingos BBQ Mitts Product ID Signs	Echinacea, Hemerocallis, Leucanthemum, Monarda
<b>Feel the Foliage</b> Plants that produce a fragrance after being touched.	Educate, attract and impulse. Display plants known not for their blooms, but for what they do.	Signage Product Information	Achillea, Geraniums (scented), Lamb's ear, Thymus, Lavender
<b>Butterfly Corner</b> Plants that attract butterflies	Popular category. Display butterfly houses and books on attracting butterflies. Educate on the proper use of insecticides on and around these plants.	Signage Product ID Cards Large Butterfly Butterfly Houses Butterfly Books	Buddleia, Hererocallis, Scabiosa, Sedum
<b>Afternoon Delight</b> Plants for 3-6 hours of sun per day.	Partial shade needs to be defined. Late afternoon sun or northeast exposure. The right plant is crucial in these areas.	Educational Information Signage Product ID Cards	Coreopsis, Hemerocallis, <i>Phlox paniculata</i>

Courtesy of Jennifer Holland, Horticolor and Walter's Gardens

### Water plants

Discount Pond Supplies has a large selection of hardy and tropical water lilies, lotus, bog plants, submerged plants and floating plants. Additionally, lettuce and hyacinths will be available from March-September. Discount also offers a complete line of water gardening supplies from pond liners to pumps. Discount Pond Supplies Inc. (800) 979-0999. **Write in 1521**



### *Salix integra*

*Salix integra* 'Flamingo' is a much-improved sport of 'Hakuro Nishiki'. Flamingo has a deep pink coloring in the spring and retains its strong color throughout the growing season. Leaf-scorch is not a problem, as both branches and foliage are much stronger than those of Hakuro Nishiki. It produces a uniformly shaped head, and the branches are a deeper red in the winter months. Pride of Place Plants Inc. (250) 656-7963. **Write in 1522**