

# Hold Your Own Variety Trials

Homewood Nursery discovered there are many benefits to holding its own poinsettia trials. Learn more about Homewood's experience, and see if holding variety trials might be right for your garden center.

By Joe Stoffregen

**W**hen you hear the word “trials” at your greenhouse or garden center, you may think immediately of the many challenges we all face to be successful in our industry. Personnel issues, customer service challenges, rising overhead costs, understanding consumer and product trends — the last thing you need at your business is another trial. But not all trials are bad, and as we found out at Homewood Nursery, Raleigh, N.C., some trials can be very beneficial.

For the last 10 years, Homewood Nursery has participated in the National Poinsettia Trials. This has been a cooperative effort between the University of Florida, Purdue University and North Carolina State University, and the

poinsettia breeder companies: Ecke Ranch, Fischer USA, Dummen USA, Selecta First Class and Ogelvie Ltd.

The immediate benefit of this joint effort was the opportunity to work with industry leaders and be on the cutting edge in the development and evaluation of new plant varieties. As time went by, we also came to realize the potential the trials had in the marketing and promotion of poinsettias to our consumers.

## Encouraging Participation

One of my favorite quotes from Walt Disney is: “People spend money when and where they feel good,” and I have found truth in that at our poinsettia trials. We have been amazed at the number of people who come to ▶



Homewood Nursery sets up a “Vote For Your Favorite Poinsettia” display. The display includes approximately 40 numbered varieties and provides voting slips for customers to indicate their five favorite plants. (Photos: Homewood Nursery)



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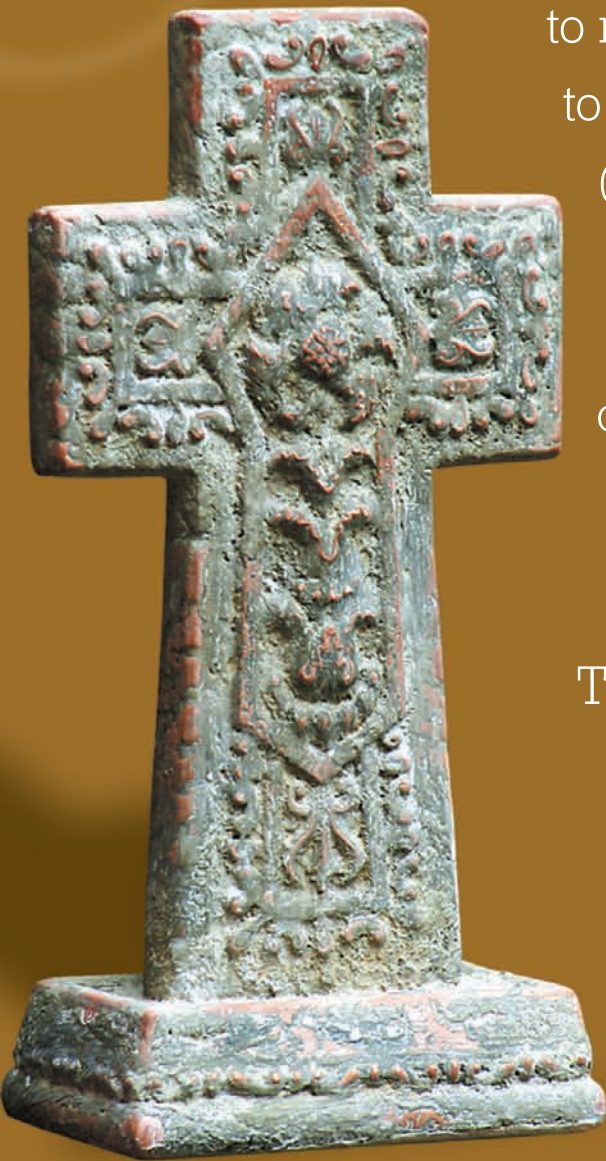
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Homewood to see the new varieties, take pictures and ask questions. I have noticed people enjoying time in our greenhouses. Few leave empty-handed as they must pass through displays of poinset-

tias to see the 100-plus plant trial varieties.

We soon began having a "Vote For Your Favorite Poinsettia" display. We show approximately 40 numbered varieties and give out

voting slips for customers to indicate their five favorite plants. All consumers have to do is write down the plant's number, indicate their genders (We all know it is the females' vote that really matters!) and drop their slips into the voting box. We even have a separate voting slip and ballot box for children to participate and feel a part of the process.

Generally, between 700 and 1,000 people take the time to vote, with no incentives offered. We do tell them through signage that we greatly value their input and will share the results of the vote with our industry.

I am always surprised at how many people stop in the middle of the busy holiday season and take the time to select their favorite varieties. We have found that having consumers vote on all trial varieties is too much and greatly cuts down on the number of people who vote. An ideal variety number would probably be

less than 40, but we have a hard time going lower than that.

### Trial Benefits

Trials have a lot of potential when it comes to marketing poinsettias to consumers — but that is not the only benefit for garden centers. From immediate feedback to a sense of uniqueness for your employees, there are numerous benefits of holding variety trials.

**Immediate feedback.** You and your staff have seen the new varieties instead of relying on a salesperson to tell you about the plants. Holding trials helps you gain firsthand experience that is invaluable in making ordering decisions for next year. The trials allow you to gauge the public's response to a new variety and see consumers' reactions and enthusiasm (or lack of) for each plant. The growers at Homewood love the immediate feedback they are able to witness from the direct contact with end purchasers.



Between 700 and 1,000 people take the time to vote for their favorite poinsettia varieties at Homewood Nursery's trial.



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I am always surprised at how many people stop in the middle of the busy holiday season and take the time to select their favorite varieties.

though our most memorable coverage came on our local ABC station. In December 2000, the station did a segment on our vote for the favorite poinsettia while the nation was in an uproar over the voting debacle between Al Gore

and George W. Bush. The evening news stated, "We may not know who our next President of the United States is but we do know the top vote getter in poinsettias." Priceless coverage.

**Sense of uniqueness.** The tri-

als foster a sense of uniqueness and pride among Homewood's staff. Let's face it, to a lot of growers and retailers, poinsettias are a commodity. Our staff really enjoys that we display more varieties of poinsettias than anyone else and

**Enhanced image.** You have the opportunity to enhance your image in the consumers' eyes. Your perception as an expert in the horticulture field is strengthened as customers start thinking, "These guys must be good growers if they are doing new variety evaluations!" Doing the trials allows you to differentiate your business in the crowded marketplace. In fact, the trials are a key component in Homewood Nursery's Christmas advertising and set the garden center apart.

**Marketing possibilities.** The trials are an excellent marketing tool. We are able to promote the trials by telling consumers to come and see what is new in poinsettias and letting them know there are 100-plus varieties on display. Over the years, we have had numerous articles in local, state and national publications as well as television and radio coverage. I cannot recall a year when we did not have some form of free publicity from our local media.

Twice we have had the trials featured on the statewide Public Broadcasting System (PBS),

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people visit us just to see the trials. We have become a destination during the holidays; we celebrate the beauty of poinsettias and present them as a value crop.

Creative displays, unique varieties not seen anywhere else, consumer participation through voting

and a staff that is excited to be selling poinsettias combine to create a winning formula at Homewood. The experience certainly beats sleeved poinsettias packed on metal carts in a big box store. The stigma of the poinsettia as a commodity does not exist at Homewood, and



Homewood Nursery promotes the trials by telling consumers to come and see the 100-plus new poinsettia varieties on display.



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the trials are an important part of the reason why.

**Staying current.** A final benefit of doing the trials is it keeps us from getting complacent through growing the same few varieties year after year. Because we are always exposed to what is new, we have to pick and choose annually which varieties to grow and market. We are always being forced to cut back or eliminate some varieties to make room for new ones. Another favorite quote of mine is from Will Rogers. He stated, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." We know we are on the right track in growing poinsettias, and our efforts with the trials keep us moving forward.

### Weigh The Factors

There are some challenges when it comes to running a trial. Trials take up a significant amount of growing space that might otherwise be used for producing more top-selling plants. Trials produce a few more challenges for growers in that those growers are constantly dealing with small quantities of many different plants, and they might not always know the cultural requirements of each one.

We place the 40 plants used for voting in a high-traffic area that is a prime merchandising area, which could instead be used for more revenue-generating product. However, when we have these concerns, we ultimately always decide that the benefits and opportunity to differentiate ourselves in the marketplace far outweigh the disadvantages. 🌱

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