

Let's Get Together

This year's trip to California for the 2009 Pack Trials was further proof that the lines between breeders, growers and retailers are really blurring going forward — all to ensure the happiness (and continued spending!) of the fickle consumer.

By Jasmina Radjevic, Tim Hodson and Paige Worthy

During this year's California Pack Trials, attendees were graced with gorgeous weather all up and down the coast, great color and optimism at every stop, and an advance look at what's on the way from the breeders and various product manufacturers for 2010.

The *Lawn & Garden Retailer* staff, as always, went to California seeking the best new varieties and standout merchandising and display trend ideas for our retail readers. And while every stop we made during our journey from San Diego to San Francisco was unique, there were a few industry-defining patterns in the marketplace.

The biggest trend? The imaginary walls that once stood between highly scientific breeders, workhorse growers and marketing-minded retailers are coming down, and fast. It's all about consumers — and their limited discretionary income — now, and teamwork is a huge factor in strengthening the industry as we move toward the other side of this recession.

Here's a glimpse into what else we saw at this year's trials.

The Impact of the Economy

The economy and how consumers are reacting were on everyone's mind. In March, when the stock market was at its worst, we were anticipating a rather subdued atmosphere and lighter attendance this year.

But that wasn't the case at all.

The overall mood at all of our stops was not negative; in fact, it was pretty upbeat. While none of the breeders were setting attendance records this year, all of them said they were extremely pleased with the number and the quality of attendees they had.

Many of the breeders as well as other suppliers were focusing on how to get their products off of the benches and into the carts and ultimately the backyards of consumers.

It's All About the Consumer

Among all of Proven Winners' new variety introductions in Bonsall, there was a big emphasis on what the company is doing to reach out to cash-strapped consumers. The company has done quite a bit of research to find out more about today's consumers. As a



Breeders and manufacturers went all out this year with their merchandising displays, focusing on product color and seasonal use.



FROM THE ROAD PACK TRIALS



Proven Winners' Pretty Much Picasso, right, was among the standouts in this year's new introductions at Pack Trials.

result of this research, Proven Winners has made a concerted advertising effort in magazines and on radio and television to reach shoppers.

At the Speedling location in San Juan Bautista, MasterTag also presented some unique ways to reach out to consumers with different types of marketing programs, tags, packaging and signage.

Another huge trend among consumers that continues to grow is combinations. This year, more than ever, breeders put a great amount of effort into mixed combinations. These have been growing in popularity over the past several years, but breeders are making it even easier by offering combo-ready liners. Selecta First Class added six new mixes to its TrixiLiner series for 2010. Syngenta also debuted its KwikKombo program this year, which features production-friendly 3-in-1 mixed liners.

Staycation's the Word

Economic pundits have been predicting that, during the first half of this year, many consumers will be cutting back on their travel budgets because of the shaky economy and staycating at home. This outdoor living/escape to the back yard theme was evident at many of the locations, including Paul Ecke Ranch, John Henry Co.'s display at Greenheart Farms and Suntory/Jackson & Perkins.

At Paul Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, they did a great job combining outdoor living ele-

new classics



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PACK TRIALS FROM THE ROAD

ments with great retail merchandising ideas with the “Deckorate” display in their Ecke Garden Center. And at Goldsmith Seeds and Syngenta, many of the new variety introductions were displayed in seasonal outdoor living arrangements.

Incredible Edibles

Before Michelle Obama took to the White House “backyard” to plant the first family’s organic vegetable and herb garden, before the mass movement to bring back victory gardens, vegetables slowly began to creep back into consumers’ consciousness.

It started with small herb lines and a few heirloom tomatoes quietly introduced in corners of last year’s Pack Trials, but this year many of the breeders had caught on, rolling out collections of organics and jewel-toned, plump vegetables for containers and gardens that have been in development for years.

Our first stop, Plug Connection, brought this trend to the forefront. In addition to its continued emphasis on eco-friendly containers and plants, their Organiks line continues to grow and took center stage at this year’s exhibit. The display included many of the Organiks varieties of herbs and vegetables, including ▶

Edibles really took center stage at many locations during Pack Trials, including Pacific Plug & Liner, Floranova and Ball Horticultural Co.

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Breeding Excellence

Although consumers have been cutting back on their purchases — and this year has been a tricky one for retailers looking to buy just the right product to sell — breeders know that tired varieties will never sell. So they continue trying to beat their best, year after year. Here's a look at some of the trends we saw in breeding this year.

Focus on Improvement

Although many Pack Trials exhibitors boasted lots of new introductions for 2010, it seems they focused less on the new and more on the improved. Breeders shared with us the confusion and unnecessary headaches that go along with offering geraniums in five shades of pink and are working to eliminate duplicate variety colors and focusing on the genetics of a select few favorites. When consumers walk into a garden center and find so many variations of the same variety, they may become overwhelmed and not purchase anything at all.

Novel Concepts

When it comes to new genetics, many of the breeders are introducing more novel varieties designed to get retailers and consumers excited. Just as breeder companies seek ways to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, gardeners today may be looking to differentiate themselves from their neighbors. As one reader shared with us, "gardening is an expressive art form and a creative outlet." Growers and retailers should both take note of this trend when choosing which varieties to grow and sell. The breeders are catching on and adding very different colors and combinations to the mix. One example is Proven Winners' 'Pretty Much Picasso'. This violet petunia has green outer edges and would make an exciting addition to mixed planters. Another petunia that caught our attention was PanAmerican Seed's 'Sophistica Yellow Rose Bicolor', which boasts yellow flowers with bright-pink streaks.

Experimentals on Display

Despite the heavy interest in improving what's already available, it was great to get a sneak peek of experimental varieties from many of the breeders. In an effort to choose only the best varieties to introduce in the future, breeders shared many of the varieties they have in the works. And they were eager to hear our feedback. With the current economic situation, its clear breeders want to make the most of their investments, and they are concentrating solely on varieties they are sure will succeed in the marketplace, for growers, retailers and consumers alike.

This year, Danziger decided to do some research and development in the perennial market. And they displayed all their experimental perennials at their Pack Trials stop. We're excited to see how these stunning varieties, including heuchera, coreopsis and gaillardia, perform in the future.



Many of the breeders were eager to give us a sneak peek at some of the experimental varieties that they are still trialing for possible future introduction.

tomatoes and both hot and sweet peppers, as well as splashy POP and merchandising materials designed to create a strong brand identity.

A little farther north, Ball Horticultural Co. welcomed Pack Trials attendees to the "Shoppes on Main" and enthusiastically boasted the introduction of their Burpee Home Gardens line of herbs and vegetables. The program, a collaboration between Ball and the W. Atlee Burpee Company, offers Burpee-branded, garden-ready plants that will be available nationally by 2010. The plants on display featured colorful, informational tags with all the light, soil and other care requirements gardeners could need — and to provide further help, Ball rolled out a consumer-g geared website just before Pack Trials that provides "information, ideas and inspiration."

Across the Atlantic, Floranova actually formed a completely separate company to spearhead its vegetable-breeding efforts. Vegetalis, which was unveiled at their trial site, also markets Floranova's existing line of vegetables. Floranova has always had a knack for eye-catching displays at Pack Trials, but the high-drama photos of star-shaped okra, larger-than-life tomatoes and round, white eggplant that accompanied the plant displays let everyone know that vegetables have really come into their own.

Finally, our visit with Hishtil at Pacific Plug & Liner's site was both fragrant and flavorful! Hishtil introduced the fruits — literally — of 12 years of breeding labor with a sweet tomato, Tomaccio, that can be dried or eaten fresh. (And they had samples...delicious!) They also introduced new varieties of basil, mint and other herbs. One novel favorite: a banana mint that must be smelled to be believed!

As with any trend, it's hard to know whether this one will stick with consumers for any length of time, but for now? Eat it up. ☺

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