



A Pack Trial Adventure

Lawn & Garden Retailer and GCA offered retailers a new adventure with a guided tour of this year's California Pack Trials.

By Bridget White

Can you imagine anything more fun than riding around California with a busload of garden center owners during the beginning of their spring rush? We couldn't either, so with a lot of planning, a little convincing and cell phones in every hand, *Lawn & Garden Retailer* and the Garden Centers of America (GCA) launched the first annual Retail Pack Trial Tour this past March.

Our 12 attendees, representing seven garden centers, started on Tuesday morning, March 30 in San Diego and spent the next three and one-half days stopping at eight breeder sites all the way up the coast to Watsonville.

We all knew the late March timeframe was going to be tricky for garden centers; after all, many parts of the country are already approaching peak in late March, and others are getting ready for it. But a few brave souls, enticed by the lure of new and unusual plants, took the plunge for one of the most valuable tours they said they had ever attended.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In case you've never been to the Pack Trials, a bit of background. Every year in late March or early April, depending on when Easter falls, flower breeders and marketers from around the world travel to California and hold open houses. This two-week period, which has already been planned out through

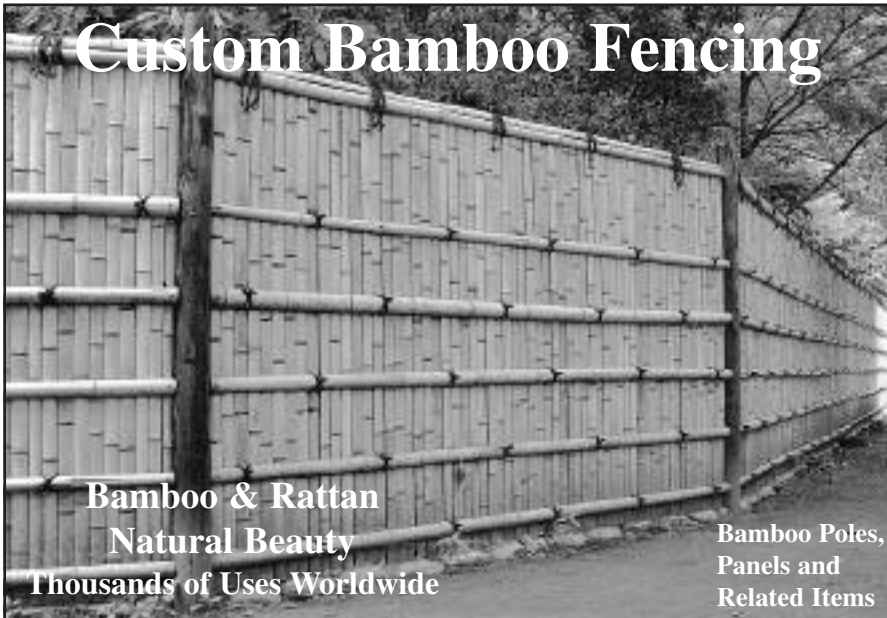
2010, is when breeders/marketers introduce their new varieties for the following spring and, as such, is widely considered the most important U.S. event of the year for the industry.

As its name implies, the Pack Trials originated as an event for side-by-side, pack comparison of seed genetics but has, in the past five or so years, evolved into a showcase of marketing innovations and genetic potential, with most exhibitors showing oversized finished containers. And if you think of this as a grower event, that too has changed. Large and extra-large retailers are now the most coveted attendees (yes, most of the chains make the trip), as they can provide the pull-through necessary to sell seeds and cuttings.

From a retailer's perspective the best thing about attending the Pack Trials is exposure to new and unusual genetics — the very thing that most independents rely on for differentiation. "We saw so many plants that are out there that we were not even aware of," said Susan Bubak with Ray Wiegand Nursery, Macomb, Mich. "I got to see what all was available, and it was a real eye opener for me. We've already ordered some seeds of things that we didn't grow in the past, not because it won't work in our market but because no one in our market knows about it. Pack Trials just really educates you. It's not at all like seeing things in a catalogue. You get to see the true color and how it will perform instead of just a picture." ♦

In addition to seeing all the new varieties, tour attendees received results from a grower trial of gerbera at Pacific Plug and Liner.

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P. Allen Smith talked to tour attendees about consumer trends, using color and some of the retail-focused Flower Fields programs.

According to Jack Bigej, Al's Garden Center, Woodburn Ore., there were other benefits to the tour as well. "I was there before but never have we had the networking to go along with all the plant material, and that made it so much better. If you go with your own people, one person has a map, one person has white knuckles on the wheel trying to maneuver traffic, everyone's trying to find locations, and you still miss stops. Here, you sit back and visit with other retailers and leave the driving to someone else. I got so much just from talking to the other attendees. It made a great event even better."

So why is everyone looking to the California Pack Trials? As we heard from the attendees on our bus, it's a trip like no other. "There was spontaneous combustion on that bus," said Bigej. "There was just so much going on with new plants and industry discussions. People are really missing out if they don't attend next year."

PLAN AHEAD

While the benefits of Pack Trials are fresh in your mind, we wanted to let you know a little about our plans for next year's Retail Pack Trial Tour.

Exhibiting companies have set the Pack Trial dates at April 4-13, 2005, a bit later next year. And while we don't have specific details yet, we will be holding our tour sometime during those two weeks. Next year, we are planning for a larger group, a little more time on the road and just as many opportunities to network and identify new crops.

If you're like me and you like to plan things ahead of time, mark off your calendar for next year's Retail Pack Trial Tour. We can promise a trip like no other. ☺

Bridget White is editorial director of Lawn & Garden Retailer. She can be reached by phone at (847) 391-1004 or E-mail at bwhite@sgcmail.com.

Editor's Note: Be sure to check out next month's coverage of Pack Trials, where we will show you the best of the best of what we saw.

A SPECIAL THANKS

We want to extend a special word of thanks to the companies that supported the Retail Pack Trial Tour with meals, event or bus sponsorships, and financial contributions. Without the support of these companies, an event such as this would not be possible.

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