

Rockin' The Oldies

Some universal crops can be found in many gardens and at most garden centers. How do you get customers excited about these old standards?

By Meghan Boyer



Most consumers, even those who have never picked up a trowel, can rattle off the names of a few ubiquitous crops such as impatiens, geraniums or petunias. They are some of the old standards you found in your grandma's garden each spring. They've been planted for ages and are sold in nearly every garden center, supermarket and big box store. Customers typically leave with a few each season, but no one is busting down your door to get them. And they won't be until you get consumers excited about the old standards.

Preplan

A cluster of frenzied customers lining up to amass old favorites isn't a phenomenon that materializes overnight: It takes forethought. Whether you're a retailer or a grower/retailer, you need to anticipate which crop you want to push and how many to have on hand. Some important factors to consider during preplanning are when the event will happen, how many days it will last and how much product you will bring in for it.

Tina Bemis, co-owner of Bemis Farms Nursery, Spencer, Mass., chooses which crop she wants to create excitement about months in advance. Her decision is based in part on specials offered by vendors. She negotiates with them and commits in December to a price and number of flats for a promotion that will occur in the spring. Because the product is contract grown, she is committed to running a promotion on the chosen date no matter the weather conditions. Luckily for her, rain and even snow haven't crushed her customers' excitement yet.

Similarly, Jack Bigej, owner of Al's Garden Center, Woodburn, Sherwood and Gresham, Ore., works in advance: "Because we are a grower/retailer, we can grow these events ahead of time and have plant promotions." His promotions for the next spring are in place by the prior fall. Such preparedness can help ensure every eager customer's order is accommodated.

Create A Buzz

Organizing a promotion or special event around standard crops can create buzz among your customers. While a promotion anytime during the year has potential to bring people into your store, planning a promotion at the advent of the spring season can capitalize on people's desire for color after a long winter. Bigej understands this. He knows people are hungry for color when spring rolls around, and he benefits by having a standard crop ready to go: "I have 186,000 primroses planted that we will sell at \$.50 apiece in mid-February to whip up excitement and get things flowing." He also hopes that hooking people with a promotion in the spring will make Al's their garden center when it comes to purchasing other products throughout the year.

Promotions can also encourage customers to stock up on more than they originally intended to and draw people who otherwise wouldn't purchase at that time into the garden center. Bigej notes that people purchase items to coordinate with the standard crops, thereby driving up his sales.

For the past several years, Bemis has been running an impatiens event, and during the last one, the first impatiens event to have good weather, the customers filled their

Top: Using attractive promotional material is one way to bring attention to an old crop. **Bottom:** Displaying these old standards is just another simple way to encourage customers to purchase them.



Container garden

The eggling looks like a large egg, but once the top is cracked open, a garden grows. Seeds are already sown into the eggling's fortified peat mixture. Plants should grow for up to five months in the eggling, after which they can be planted directly in soil. The handmade eggling comes with a terra cotta tray and an extra seed pack. It is available with one of eight herbs or flowers and is packed in a gift box. Noted. (800) 600-7216. **Write in 1436**

Pansy

Pansymonium is a collection of exotic and unusual pansies, presenting an enhanced look and giving more life to this popular crop. New colors have been added to the three categories in the collection: a large-faced pansy called BigShot; the lacey, frilly Flamenco; and Hot Chilly, named for its tolerance and staying power in extreme temperature. Fernlea Flowers Ltd. (800) 265-6789. **Write in 1453**



Balls of seed

SeedBallz (hand rolled by people with disabilities) are balls of clay loaded with seeds and a mix of organic materials. When placed into the ground in a sunny location SeedBallz are designed to sprout and create clusters of flowers. Ten percent of all sales of "Seeds of Hope" is donated to women in financial need. SeedBallz. (800) 398-0539. **Write in 1438**



Astilbe

'Color Flash Lime' has light gold/lime green foliage that is present all season long. Small, pale-pink flowers form a plume-like inflorescence that extends 10 or more inches above the leaves. Flowers bloom from late spring through midsummer. Plants grow 6-10 inches tall by 20 inches wide, with flowers rising above the foliage to 20 inches tall. 'Color Flash Lime' works in containers, beds, borders and landscapes. Anthony Tesselaar. 613 9737 9568. **Write in 1450**



Miniature roses

Nor'East miniature rose 12-inch tree rose collection can be used in containers by themselves or combined with other roses, perennials or annuals. Nor'East tree roses are grafted onto multiflora understock and shipped, budded, in 4 1/2-inch pots. The collection contains nine varieties that have compact forms and are free-flowering. Greenheart. (805) 481-2234. **Write in 1433** ♦



carts: "Instead of running in and getting their impatiens in the snow at the loss leader price and leaving, they stayed and shopped and put \$200 Japanese maples on their carts along with the impatiens," she said.

Keeping the promotion to a 2- or 3-day event will help keep costs low because you don't have to care for the plants as long. It can also increase a consumer's sense of urgency when it comes to buying. Bemis started promoting crops with 1-day sales, then worked her way up to a 2- and 3-day sale when the lines at the cash registers became too long. "This [impatiens] sale was successful for us because it was a 1-day sale or a 2-day sale, and these flats came on racks. I didn't have to unload them, the price was good to begin with, they didn't have to be dealt with — I watered them once on the rack over the weekend — and the handling on it was very minimal." Bemis turned the impatiens event into a 3-day sale the last time she ran the promotion and found that she had people coming to shop on Friday morning and going to work late because they didn't want to miss out on getting their choice of impatiens.

Creating excitement is not an exact science. Promotions are not guaranteed to work, and customers may not react as anticipated. Bigej points out: "We've gotten it [a plant] out there and really promoted it, and it didn't work. But there are some good promotions to be done yet." Starting promotions small is a good way to gauge how excited your customers are about the event. Bemis started her impatiens sales with 375 flats; the second year she bought 500 and had to take rain checks for another 135 flats; the following year she bought 1,000.

Bigej creates additional excitement for his

customers by attractively displaying plants in full bloom. To promote heliotrope, he placed large whiskey barrels full of blooming plants on the selling floor and put 4-inch pots around it. He kept four or five of the barrels going at once so he could switch out any that didn't look their best. In conjunction, he placed posters of the heliotrope around his garden center to inform customers about the plant's history.

Let Them Know

It's hard to create excitement without reaching out to your customers, which is why publicity is important. Letting your customers hear about an event in advance can create anticipation and excitement. Both Bemis and Bigej utilize advertising for their promotions. Anything from a flyer sent to customers and a sign announcing the event on the front of the store to newspaper and television ads will help. Bigej finds word-of-mouth advertising to be an invaluable part of his business. If you start an annual event, customers can anticipate the promotion and get excited at the same time each year. Any way you go about it, capitalizing on spring fever, creating an event and reaching out to customers are great ways to create excitement around the old standards. ♦

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