

Improving on the classics

BY KYM POKORNY



Clockwise from left: Hydrangea Quick Fire® is an early bloomer, blooming about a month before other *Hydrangea paniculata* varieties; SunPatiens are resistant to the diseases that plagued impatiens, including fungal blights and rots, viruses and bacterial wilt — and they deliver continuous color from spring through frost; and Redpointe® Maple grows faster, has a stronger central leader and is more upright than its predecessor, Red Sunset.

Certain plants consistently get top billing in the nursery trade. They're talked up by sales reps and they reliably land at the top of profit spreadsheets.

Usually, these stalwarts live up to industry and customer expectations because they perform well and satisfy needs in the home garden or commercial landscape. But once in a while, something comes along to outperform or outsell these major players.

To slide an industry standard even a few notches down the sales scale, a new plant must have an improvement that sells.

“When I try to figure out a new plant to carry, I want to know why it’s so cool,” said Angela Hoyt, a 30-year-old millennial working as a garden center buyer for Dennis’ 7 Dees. “It has to be new and improved.”

For instance? “Everybody and their dog has grown *Echinacea* ‘Sundown’, which got long and leggy,” she said. “Then came the Sombrero series. They’re short and stocky and come back. There are a lot of colors — whites, purples, oranges, reds. They’re awesome.”

As a cacophony of choices rain down from breeders each year, inventory lists grow longer and more complicated. Higher prices often push buyers right back to the dependable-but-sometimes-boring plants that better fit the budget. ➤

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“It’s true — often new plants are more expensive, at least at first,” said Daniel Jackson, California sales representative for Bailey Nurseries. “There are royalties for breeders, a lot of research and development. You don’t just walk out there and grow a plant. We test extensively for years. We don’t rush things to market.”

Change is good

Why mess with a standard? You can always make money from landscapers who order hundreds of *Arborvitae*, *Photinia* or *Spirea*.

Destin Brown, Northwest sales representative for Fisher Farms, is of two minds. From a retail standpoint, with a little marketing, flashy new plants practically sell themselves.

“They offer more bang for their buck,” Brown said. “But the tried-and-



Below left: The colors of *Fatsia japonica* ‘Camouflage’ meld yellow, lime and green, providing an illuminating effect in a dappled shade setting. Right: A stunning twist on the native vine maple, ‘Pacific Fire’ was selected for its glowing and brilliant red twigs that fade to a softer orange-red. PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONROVIA



true cultivars are staples for the landscape commercial jobs. *Thuja* ‘Emerald Green’ is such a commodity. It has to be low-priced. Moving on to a different variety is not going to happen. There’s not a

profit in replacing it.”

But when it comes to hydrangeas, the market has something very different to say.

Arguably the biggest breakthrough in plant breeding in decades is the repeat-blooming hydrangea, a story that started in 2004 with the first ‘Endless Summer’, which would launch a Bailey brand that no one will dispute revolutionized the hydrangea market.

Flowering on both old and new growth, the shrub gives customers what they’re craving for: “Everyone wants repeat bloomers,” Jackson said. “Ideally, people want plants to flower 365 days a year. People want color. Even me being a plants person will go into a garden center and say, ‘Oh, this is pretty’ when I see something in bloom. It gets me excited.”

Obviously, the Endless Summer series gets the public excited, as well. It’s one of Bailey’s best sellers and there’s no end in sight, especially with the 2014 introduction of ‘BloomStruck’, a repeat-bloomer of dark purple or pink depending on soil. Sales projections for 2016 are impressive, Jackson said, and will eventually surpass ‘Endless Summer’.

“It’s better than ‘Endless Summer,’” Jackson said. “People planted one or their neighbor did and they’ve seen the results and been really impressed. The word spreads and everyone gets hyped up.”

It’s in cases like the Endless Summer series that Brown agrees the landscape contingent might jump on the bandwagon.

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Too many people will holler for them and innovative marketing gives these relatively new plants an edge.

Contractors also gave the nod to popular Knock Out® roses when their value became undeniable.

“Right now, Knock Out roses have taken over half of the bedding plant market,” said Jack Bigej of Al’s Garden Centers. “You plant it once, it blooms all summer, comes back the next year, you don’t have to spray. Pretty good deal.”

But when Bigej started back in the 1950s, Knock Out roses weren’t even a fantasy. Instead, petunias were on the precipice of taking the annual market by storm. Only three washed-out colors existed: ‘Fire Chief’, ‘Celestial’ and ‘Pale Face’.

“Those were the standards,” Bigej said. “Then huge developments started. We got ‘Elk’s Pride’, a velvety purple, and then ‘Sugar Plum’, a lavender-purple with veins. People lined up.”

For decades petunias made grand strides: more saturated colors, ruffled flowers, larger flowers. And then came the trailers.

“Oh, those were exciting,” Bigej said. “And, yes, important for sales. We moved away from the standards into the new varieties as fast as we could.”

But then came budworm and no one wanted to spray. Instead growers moved toward crops of impatiens until powdery mildew took a huge monetary swipe at that crop. Now, Bigej said, SunPatiens® are the annual on the verge of becoming the new standard.

What’s old is new again

When it comes to adopting new plants, designers like Darcy Daniels of Portland enjoy the best of three worlds. She works with clients in small urban gardens, larger suburban gardens and her own, where she’s free to try whatever catches her fancy. And as much as she admires the newest and coolest on nursery shelves, Daniels will not turn her back on the bread and butter of gardening.

“You know, you can turn your nose up at some of those old stalwarts, but >>



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some of them are actually pretty handsome,” Daniels said. “Old standbys artfully used give reliability and beauty. It depends on who is on the dance card with them.”

Daniels adores good, old-fashioned *Fatsia japonica*.

“OK, it’s been done, done, done,” she said. “It’s one of those plants people often hate. But the lowly *Fatsia japonica* is a perfectly fine plant. Its foliage is evergreen, bold and glossy. It’s drought tolerant, real quick to take its place in the garden and looks good next to other things. It’s reliable.”

Still, the hype in the breeding world draws the attention of Daniels and her colleagues. What’s new? What’s cool? What’s going to make it in my client’s garden?

“Now we’ve got *Fatsia japonica* ‘Camouflage’, a Dan Hinkley plant with yellow, lime and green variegation. In my experience, it will be smaller, so it’s good for a city garden. In Portland, there’s no problem with hardiness. It looks great in a container and looks great in the ground. But we still don’t know how it will catch on.”

Like many designers, their clients and by extension others in the nursery industry, Daniels is invested in the native craze and becomes particularly keen when an improved selection like ‘Pacific Fire’ vine maple (*Acer circinatum*) comes on the market.

“It’s a native but juiced up for the gardener,” Daniels said. “‘Pacific Fire’ was selected by J. Frank Schmidt for gor-

Below left: Echinacea Big Sky Sundown sports fragrant blossoms on thick stems, making them stand out in the garden or in arrangements. Right: With its big, beautiful, repeat blooms, BloomStruck Hydrangea is an ideal home accent, whether in borders or containers.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BAILEY NURSERIES



geous red stems in winter. It gives the client a native plant but with more bang for the buck.”

Daniels also has her eye on Little Quick Fire®, a dwarf of *Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Quick Fire’, a hardworking, early-to-bloom plant that starts out white, turns pink and ends its season rose.

“I’ll give that a fair shot,” she said. “I’m always looking for small plants suitable to city gardens.”

Seeing with fresh eyes

With 450–500 trees under production at any one time, there’s a lot more than ‘Pacific Fire’ going on at J. Frank Schmidt out in Boring.

In fact, the nursery is celebrating the 50th anniversary of Red Sunset® Maple. It’s the most widely sold *Acer rubrum* in the country and perhaps the world, according to Nancy Buley, director of communications at Schmidt.

“But it’s had its day,” she said.

So the search started for a better red maple, one that grows faster, has a stronger central leader and is more upright. After poring over thousands and thousands of seedlings grown in the nursery, one rose to the top. It took 17 years from the time seed was sown, grown, trialed at 30 sites across the country and then finally introduced in 2006 as Redpointe®. Since then, it’s surpassed Red Sunset in sales.

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"My first thought was, 'Do we need it?'" Buley said. "But when I saw it in a row side by side, I said, 'Oh, I get it. This is the one I want.' It was the same with other people. They stand on their own merit. You can see the difference."

Back at Bailey Nurseries, Jackson recalled a similar story. He'd grown up yawning at his neighbor's *Hibiscus syriacus*. What's the big deal? he wondered. Yeah, they're pretty when they bloom, but it's only for a few weeks a year and they take up a lot of space. Then in 2012 Bailey released the Island series with 'Bali', 'Tahiti', 'Fiji' and 'Hawaii'.

"Personally, it's not a plant I was super excited about," he said. "OK, new hibiscus. Whatever. Then I got my hands on some. Once those things start to bloom in June, they don't stop until it freezes. It blooms up to the tips and then starts at the base again. It shocked me. They've got the wow factor for sure. And they're hardy to Zone 5."

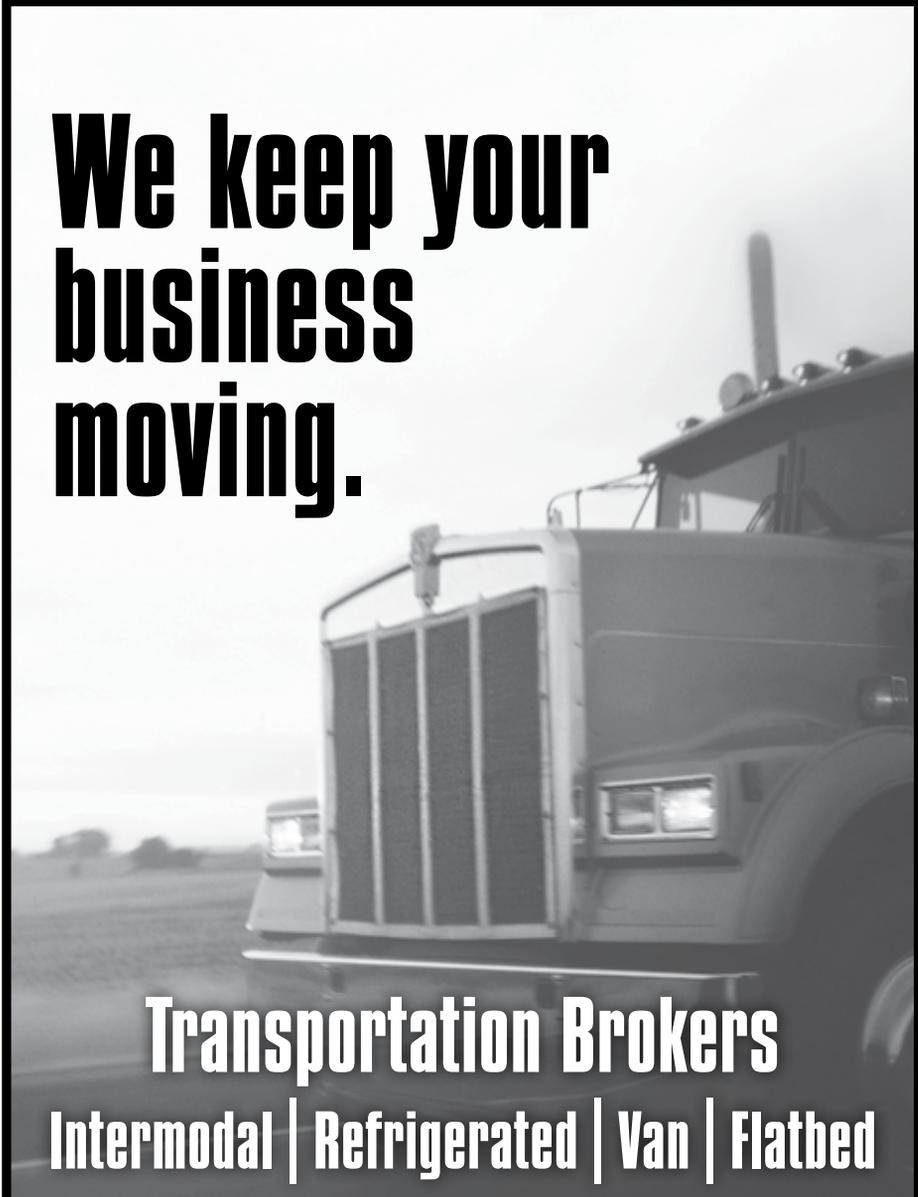
One of Bailey's top-selling plants is their shrub dogwood. In 2012, a new one called Baton Rouge™ (*Cornus alba* 'Minbat') joined the nursery's First Editions® brand.

The compact 3-by-4-foot shrub with green foliage, white flowers and bird-attracting white berries is nice enough, but it isn't until the foliage takes its leave in winter and the twigs turn a screaming red that the show really begins.

One grumpy visitor to the nursery didn't seem to notice, though. When Jackson slowed down to give him a look, the guy said, "I hate those things, keep driving." But just a few minutes later in another block of the nursery, the man yelled, "Stop the van! What is that?" Then he paused, took another look and said sheepishly, "Did I just tell you to stop the van for red twig dogwood? I've gotta have some!"

Sounds like a new standard in the making. ☺

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