



HELLO, GOODBYE

Amidst a constant stream of new introductions, growers must constantly evaluate their plant lineups

BY CURT KIPP

ANY BUSINESS must decide what to offer its customers. But for wholesale nurseries, such decisions are critical.

The marketplace is always changing, and with it, so must growers. In the big picture, they must decide what type of material to grow, as well as whether to grow a narrow or wide variety of selections. In the smaller picture, they must decide annually which individual selections to add or drop.

The impacts of these decisions can reverberate through every facet of the business for years to come. A reasoned approach is important. All such decisions carry the risk of growing too much stock, or leaving money on the table through missed opportunity.

“We’ve made some good choices and we’ve made some bad ones in the past,” said Barry Gregory, who serves as vice president of sales and marketing at Kraemer’s Nursery, a large grower of trees and shrubs in Mt. Angel, Oregon.

“We’ve brought on something we thought was going to be better than it was. The consumer didn’t see the value and it just didn’t work. And we’ve had some items go from ‘not even on your production plan’ to growing 150,000 of

them. There are no guarantees.”

Hunger for the new

By monitoring the constant stream of new plant introductions to the industry, wholesale nurseries can add promising new plants and hopefully stay ahead of competitors.

“If you have nothing new, I think you lose some enthusiasm, particularly from independent garden centers,” said Josh Zielinski of Alpha Nursery, a medium-sized grower with a broad lineup of woody plants in Salem, Oregon.

“If we say we don’t have anything that’s new, it’s hard to say what would happen to those customers.”

New plants can tie up company resources, but they can also aid customer retention during tough times.

“When people were writing orders with smaller quantities on each line item, the best way to keep your orders up was to add another line item,” Zielinski said. “So we tried all sorts of stuff during the recession and it helped.”

According to Eric Hammond, propagation manager at Heritage Seedlings & Liners Inc. in Salem, new plants in a particular genus can also expand the market from the original species alone. But every

grower, as a practical matter, must limit the number of products offered.

“There are hundreds of varieties of magnolias and they’re all beautiful, but you’ve got to draw the line somewhere,” he said.

John Blair is sales manager at Iwasaki Bros. Nursery in Hillsboro, Oregon, which grows annuals, edibles and perennials. He said that more is better — to a point.

“It’s always interested me to have interesting, wider selections than not to have them,” he said. “I’d rather err on too much selection than not enough.”

Factors to consider

When considering whether to grow something or pass on it, the deciding factors will depend on the grower and the circumstances.

“There’s no right approach to it,” Zielinski said. “It all depends on customer demand for a specific item. Nothing makes me want to bring a new item on more than that.”

Still, the growers we interviewed identified several factors they usually consider.

Is the plant unique or does it have the “wow factor?” Kraemer’s will often set new plants in front of neutral observers to gauge their reaction. “When you 



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set it out on a bench, are people going to say, 'What is that?'" Gregory said. "If it doesn't meet the wow factor, we might not even ask those other questions."

Will the customer see value? "If they don't, my pricing is going to have to be low and we can't make money on it," Gregory said. "And if we can't make money on it, why bother?"

Has it done well in trials? "We're not into marketing hype at all," Hammond said. "We want to believe the things we're saying in our catalog and on our website about the trees and shrubs that we're growing. So we need to have the time to experience how they do, how they grow, so we're not just blowing smoke."

But trials take time. "There are two sides to the coin," Hammond said. "We want to have those introductions, but we want to do the due diligence on the front end and say yes, that really is a better cultivar. And that's where it gets difficult, because the timeline gets a lot longer for woody plants."

"That's where trusting a breeder comes into play," Zielinski said.

Does it improve on a classic? "A lot of the newer genetics ... you can set them side by side and they don't look different, but [they] are more disease resistant and more pest resistant," Gregory said. "It's a good thing for the nursery industry to gravitate towards those newer selections so the end customer has a chance to take them home and be successful."

Is the classic being replaced still popular? Grace Dinsdale, owner of perennials and annuals grower Blooming Nursery in Cornelius, Oregon, remembers when *Viola* 'Ulla' was introduced as a replacement for *Viola* 'Purple Showers'. 'Ulla' looks the same, but is more weather resistant and blooms twice as long.

"It's just a better plant in every way," Dinsdale said. "And it doesn't sell. People always want 'Purple Showers.' That's why you see a lot of names like 'Purple Showers improved'."

As a result, Dinsdale will sometimes phase one plant out while phasing the other in, allowing customers to dictate the pace.

When does the plant bloom? Generally speaking, plants should come into bloom just as they arrive at the retailer. "Certainly April and May blooming carries a lot more weight than in August, because the consumers are in the store in April and May," Gregory said.

But the timing can vary, depending on the location of grower as well as seller.

"In Oregon, we are spring shippers," Zielinski said. "For a lot of garden centers back east and in the Midwest, a lot of the early spring material comes from here — a lot of evergreen conifers and dormant container trees, sort of the staples of the garden centers."

Is it a me-too introduction? Most growers can name at least one genus that suffers from too many introductions; no single cultivar stands out. In these genera, many growers will stick with tried-and-true selections rather than chasing every newcomer on the scene.

"For a long time pretty much all the breeders that I know of were all just picking on the same genus," Zielinski said. "It definitely got out of control with a couple of them. The weigelas and hydrangeas, there's so many of them. There's a lot that are truly unique and a bunch that are pretty similar. It seemed like you could never have the one that was going to be 'the one' that year. So we have stuck with the four we wanted and they became standbys."

Will it still be around in a few years? No one can predict with total accuracy whether a new introduction will have marketplace success. A grower should realize the possibility that a plant it chooses to grow won't sell in sufficient quantities for the breeder to make money on it.

"Sometimes the breeder will discontinue something," Dinsdale said. "This happens a lot, now that there are so many introductions. And because it's patented, that's the end of the story. That's frustrating — it's a great plant, we want to grow it, the breeder has decided it's not selling enough, we have to drop it and we're prohibited from growing a really great plant."

What does the market have to say? By looking at recent sales, growers can pre-

dict to some extent what their customers might want next. “Our customers drive some of the decisions to change varieties,” Blair said. “Part of it is our review of that category at the end of the selling season for that category.”

Ramping up for production

When deciding whether or not to grow a plant, growers should consider the impact on production. What unique requirements does this particular plant have? What are the startup costs? And how long will return on investment take?

According to Hammond, the time varies for woody plants. “It can take five years before a plant gets listed in the catalog,” he said. “That’s five years of inventory, space, handling and fertilizer. You invest all of that before you can start selling it.”

Kraemer’s Nursery creates a yearly production plan taking into account multiple years of production and sales.

“If we’re committed and want to ship more plants, we’re going to get liners and gallons at the same time — liners to shift into gallons, gallons to shift into larger sizes,” Gregory said. “You have to think about filling the supply chain, so you’ll have it one year and then the next year and then the year after that. And all of those costs are up front.”

Even for quick-to-market plants like annuals, perennials, herbs and vegetables, there’s a production curve involved.

“We have to do an evaluation in a production trial year before we feel comfortable putting it into our product line,” Blair said. “There are some things we can hop onto quickly — tomatoes and peppers and items we don’t have to wait on quite as long — but there’s a fair amount of effort that has to go into adding varieties to our existing ones.”

At Blooming Nursery, Dinsdale talks about the issue with her production manager quite frequently. “He’s always looking at production issues,” she said. “I’m always looking at it from a market angle. Sometimes I’ll say we should have dropped this dog a long time ago. Sometimes I’ll say it’s an important plant.”

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“For those plants that have to be specially grown, you often have those to yourself, and those are the plants that set you apart as a supplier,” Dinsdale said. “We do need a number of those plants to be a go-to nursery, for when people are looking for plants they can’t find in other places. If you have too many of those plants, it will bankrupt you. It’s a balancing act.”

For Zielinski, space in the greenhouse and on the nursery is the final consideration when considering which plants to produce.

“The thing that’s more expensive is the space here at the nursery,” he said. “It’s pretty much at capacity all the time, so it’s hard to decide from a space standpoint what our best investment is.”

Saying goodbye

Eventually, it happens. A plant outlives its usefulness to the company and needs to be dropped from the catalog.

The plant isn’t selling. Or worse, it sells, but isn’t profitable. It’s been superseded by something better. It’s difficult to produce. It performs in the ground, but not in containers, which is where it will be when the consumer sees it on the bench.

These are plants to consider dropping, but a phase-out also has its costs.

“Almost everything we grow is in a 1-gallon, a 5-gallon and we usually have 3–4 years’ worth of supply chain — liners, shipping stock, plants that are going to be ready next year and the year after,” Gregory said. “When you decide to drop the plant, is it so awful you’re just going to drop the item, or are you going to phase it out and sell through what’s on

the ground? Either way, going up or down costs money.”

It’s a high-stakes game. That’s why growers need to take a hard look at what they produce, even though they tend to be plant lovers at heart.

“Is it something we just think is really cool?” Zielinski asked. “That’s one we have to watch out for.”

Dinsdale realizes she can’t grow everything, but counts herself fortunate to be growing in this period of rapid introductions.

“It’s a renaissance period with the plants,” she said. “Incredible things are coming out and sure, hundreds are going to be left behind over time, but we’ll get some incredible plants out of it.” ☺

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