

March 2011

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THE NEXT BIG NICHE

GREEN ROOFS

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By Kevin Yanik

Green roof production is becoming more mainstream than myth for many growers. Perhaps it's time you took a look at your future and the next big niche.

Cover illustration by Brad Kish



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Organization Profile

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Michael's Greenhouses' head grower is a big believer in the potential of biological controls to help produce a great crop. And he says he has the plants to prove it.

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Demand For Sustainability: No Two Consumers Are Alike

By Bridget Behe, Benjamin Campbell, Jennifer Dennis,
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Gardening consumers vary in their eco-practices and attitudes, but there are trends growers should be aware of for their businesses.



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Promising Perennials

By Delilah Onofrey

The biggest players in annuals are taking perennials and shrubs to new heights. What are the hot crops and market opportunities?

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Echinacea 'Raspberry Truffle'



Echinacea 'Sombrero'



Hibiscus 'Bali'



Hibiscus 'Tahiti'

Promising Perennials

The biggest players in annuals are taking perennials and shrubs to new heights. What are the hot crops and market opportunities?



Hydrangea 'Bombshell'

by **DELILAH ONOFREY**
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GLOBAL breeding and marketing companies that built themselves on bedding plants are becoming powerhouses in perennials and shrubs through acquisitions, partnerships and in-house breeding programs.

Ball Horticultural Co.

Ball has made significant leaps in perennials and shrubs by purchasing Darwin Perennials, Kieft Seed and launching Ball Ornamentals. And PanAmerican Seed has claimed perennial breeding breakthroughs, like echinacea 'Powwow Wild Berry,' a compact, well-branched, free-flowering plant that overwinters successfully.

"Historically, echinacea with bold

colors of red, yellow or orange and with double flowers grown from tissue culture liners have been a disappointment for the grower and consumer because they had poor branching and lacked good winter hardiness," says Karl Batschke, global products manager for Darwin Perennials.

New 2012 introductions from Darwin Perennials, 'Sombrero' and 'Double Scoop' echinaceas, have been selected in Zone 5a overwintering environment from well-branched plants. "Our surveys and grower communication tell us poor winter hardiness is a constant source of frustration for the professional grower and gardening consumer," he says.

The crop convergence we're seeing across classes is driven by consumers, and the supply chain is responding. "Perennials are no longer relegated to the garden," Batschke says. "More and more

traditional perennials, such as heuchera, hosta, gaura and coreopsis, are being used in patio containers. Consumers are looking for beautiful plants that add interest to their outdoor living spaces. They are much less hung up on classifications, such as annual, perennial or shrub.

"While consumers continue to plant perennials and shrubs in their yards, they are using these classes in mixed and monoculture containers with increasing frequency. Growers and retailers are still maintaining traditional lines of demarcation, but this is changing as more multi-class containers find their way to retailers."

As far as breeding goes, we're just beginning to unlock the potential. "The opportunities in multiple perennial classes



Early Start phlox

are at a very early stage of development; think vegetative annuals in the mid 1990s," Batschke says. "Rapid development will happen as breeders put more discipline in the product development and introduction



Nectar agastaches

process; hardiness and heat trialing; production and technical support; and a supply chain that can deliver at the high level annual growers have come to expect."

Ball Ornamentals Supply Manager Tom Foley echoes Batschke's assessment that shrubs are moving out of the ground and into patio containers. Examples of new varieties suited to this are Flutterby buddleias, boxwood 'Jade Pillar' and abelia 'Sunshine Daydream.'

Another hot trend is seeing a single plant used in drifts of 10 to 30. Hydrangeas 'Bombshell' and 'Fire and Ice' are perfect candidates. "I spoke to several landscape architects who would use 'Fire and Ice' in a mass planting of 10 to 30 plants," Foley says. "There could be a big landscape impact of white, pink and red flowers changing through the season. Plus its low growth habit is perfect for home and commercial landscapes."

According to Ball's recent research, consumers consider blooming shrubs and bushes to be perennials, but grower production systems for annuals, perennials and shrubs are still distinctly separate. "The same growers have been growing perennials and woodies for many years," Foley says. "At Ball Horticultural Co., we have focused our sales organizations to best help the customer. We know the growers for woody shrubs and perennials are a different customer with different needs and expectations. The nurseries are different than the greenhouse annual growers."

Syngenta Flowers

Syngenta Flowers has been breeding perennials in-house, building on programs started by Goldsmith Seeds and S&G Flowers. Both companies have long tradi-

Terra Nova's 11 For 2011

Terra Nova Nurseries has been revolutionizing perennials with its breeding from tissue culture. Founder Dan Heims has a landscaping background and is going for plants that are low maintenance and offer continuous color and tidier habits. Here are the top 11 genera he and partner Ken Brown and the Terra Nova team have been working on:



Agastache – New range of colors on huge flower heads with Southern heat and humidity tolerance.

Coreopsis – Surprising color selection, everblooming forms, self-cleaning, less floppy and superior branching.

Cyclamen – Great foliage forms on very hardy plants and nice color range. Tissue culture plants are earlier blooming than seed-grown varieties, saving the cost of greenhouse time.

Echinacea (cone flower) – Amazing improvements in form, colors (range and less-fading forms), flower counts and suitability in containers.

Gaillardia (blanket flower) – Heavy flower production, better flower form, less sprawling habits.

Heuchera and heucherella – Always on the lookout for new colors and shapes. More selection is being made for crown count (producing fuller plants) and hanging/trailing forms.

Kniphofia (pokers) – Remarkable reblooming forms that are under two feet tall and new color forms.

Leucanthemum (Shasta daisies) – Reblooming and extended blooming period, novel colors, compact, well-branched forms. Plants rebloomed three times, all the way into frost.

Nepeta (cat mints) – Low to the ground and a more effective, aromatic groundcover with repeat bloom, the first gold form.

Tiarella (foam flower) – Less flowering (yes, too many flowers can present a maintenance hassle) and new leaf forms on trailing varieties

Tradescantia (spider wort) – Improved the plant's form and extended the palette of flower colors over gold foliage.

For more information, visit TerraNovaNurseries.com.

tions in breeding seed annuals and have developed perennials that offer grower-friendly habits, more flower power and extended bloom time. Key genera include lavender, rudbeckia, penstemon, gaillardia, leucanthemum, salvia, aubrieta and saxifraga.

"Syngenta is looking for perennial crops that flower the first year, rather than needing vernalization or overwintering," says breeder Har Stemkins, who is based in



Hydrangea 'Endless Summer Bella Anna'

Holland. "These items are faster for growers to produce, within eight months after sowing seed or sticking cuttings – potting in early spring and blooming by summer. Syngenta is looking for perennials that show well at retail and provide the customers with instant bloom once planted in the garden. This gives consumers a chance to experience perennials in a new way, rather than buying a green plant that maybe they wouldn't have chosen without flowers."

For the consumer, instant gratification is what it's all about. "Consumers are looking toward easy, colorful plants with little work involved," Stemkins says. "Syngenta is providing perennials that are in bloom when they buy them and will bloom again next year. Buying perennials is an easier way to add to the landscape. Traditional consumers will still buy the colorful annual six-packs, but with new, more colorful, easier-to-produce perennials on the market, perhaps it will spark new trends in the colorscape."

Proven Winners

While Proven Winners had been carrying a limited assortment of perennials starting with the Dulce heucheras from Terra Nova, the company dramatically expanded its perennial prowess through a partnership with perennial specialist Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Mich. The model is similar to what Proven Winners has achieved with Spring Meadow Nursery in ColorChoice shrubs.

Proven Winners' director of new products, Rick Schoellhorn, says the goal for the brand is to have a complete offering. "The addition of the Color Choice shrubs was so successful. It changed the way woody producers viewed introductions," he says. "We're predominantly bedding plant growers. We needed someone with expertise in perennials and Walters was

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the obvious choice. The idea was to fulfill the portfolio. There are two or three groups of plants down the line that will require partnerships."

About 25 of more than a thousand plants Walters produces are in the Proven Winners line. "As our partnership with Walters matures, the plant material will change over time," Schoellhorn says, noting a number of great plants are so widely

available, it wouldn't make sense to put them in the Proven Winners program. "If you take a free variety and put it in Proven Winners, then it becomes more expensive," he says. "Instead, we're working with breeders to develop and improve varieties to find the next breakthrough."

For instance, instead of carrying rudbeckia 'Goldsturm,' Proven Winners is looking for the next innovation in



More Online

Check out a gallery of the most cutting-edge perennials and shrubs at [Greenhouse Grower.com/March 2011](http://GreenhouseGrower.com/March 2011)

'Goldsturm.' A prime example of the type of variety Proven Winners is looking for is Walters Gardens' leucanthemum 'Banana Cream,' which has a distinctive color and is full of axillary buds to provide a second or third flush of blooms. "Repeat blooming is close to the consumer ideal," he says.

As a breeder, agent and propagator, Walters Gardens hybridizes new perennials in a broad range of genera. "Different plants appeal to different people for many reasons," Walters' Marketing Communications Director Susan Martin says. "Some are looking for long-blooming varieties. Others are looking for native cultivars or drought-tolerant plants."

While most of what Walters offers are winter-hardy, temperennials (hardy in zones 7 or warmer) have been an emerging category. "As the line between annuals and perennials blurs, and more people are using perennials for seasonal interest in containers, the hardiness of these types of plants becomes less relevant," Martin says.

Trialing plants is essential to ensure consumers get plants that perform and the best value. "There can never be enough trialing because the growing conditions across the United States vary so much, but we are doing our best to make sure it happens," she says.

Schoellhorn, who is based in Florida, adds summer hardiness is just as important as winter hardiness when putting together national programs. He wishes someone would overlay the USDA Hardiness Zone and American Horticultural Society's Heat Zone maps to create true national zones. Zone 8 in Oregon is very different than Zone 8 in Georgia or Florida.

"Each plant that doesn't make it represents a disenchanted consumer," he says. "Hostas are the No. 1 perennial, but are they planted in San Diego? No. It's a great perennial if you have snow in the winter. How do you avoid hostas being sold in Miami? Most consumers think perennial means immortal. We've always wanted the bulletproof plant, but it's not realistic. All you can do is look for the best in the class."

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