

SELECTION OF NEW PLANTS FOR PROPAGATION AND INTRODUCTION INTO THE NURSERY INDUSTRY

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Our American society has evolved into one that wants the latest styles. It is willing to try the latest diet plans, tennis shoes, trucks, and automobiles. It is subject to styles, crazes, and fads. I think that the plant-consuming public is infected with this same societal characteristic of demanding new styles accompanied by willingness to pay for them. For instance, Monrovia Nursery Company has been a very successful wholesale grower for many years. Monrovia offers a wide variety and is constantly introducing new plant types, usually at a premium price.

The landscaping sector of our industry is not greatly affected by new cultivars as it seems to be less imaginative, less likely to innovate and try different plants than are retail consumers. Throughout the South, cultivars that were used en masse 20, ten, and five years ago are basically the same cultivars that are used today. Kurume azaleas, variegated liriope, dwarf Burford holly, 'Helleri' Japanese holly, 'Compacta' Japanese holly, and junipers are examples of old standbys. These are available in large volume, are generally dependable, and perform well. Some plants fall out of favor such as variegated Japanese pittosporum, waxleaf privet, and Fraser photinia. Environmental conditions are the main reason for this. Chain discount nursery retailers many times continue to stock a few cultivars in large quantities year after year, ignoring the opportunity to sell new styles and new cultivars.

Besides meeting the demand to capitalize on the public's desire for new plants, there are other reasons wholesale growers should introduce new plants into their nursery. One reason is to offer the public a better plant—one that might have disease and insect resistance, superior foliage, bloom color, plant form, desirable bark characteristics, cold hardiness, or drought tolerance. Another reason is that a plant with these characteristics might be produced more economically.

For 10 years I have been primarily responsible for selection, introduction, and production of new plants for Flowerwood Nursery. We have 561 cultivars in production this year. Ten years ago we produced approximately half that many. Many introductions have been tried and have failed including *Berberis webberi*, *Kerria japonica*, *Ligustrum japonicum*, *Ilex crenata* 'Highlander,' and *Vitex*. Failure can occur due to several reasons

such as poor adaptability to container culture, lack of cold hardiness, or intolerance of the heat, humidity, and high rainfall that we experience on the Gulf Coast. Sometimes an introduction fails because it is just a sorry, ugly plant, or because of ineffective marketing by our sales staff.

HOW AND WHERE NEW SELECTIONS ARE MADE

Public parks, botanical gardens, arboretums, and university campuses are great resources for nurserymen looking for new cultivars. One particular treasure that I found, *Ilex* 'Martha E. Berry,' a beautiful, openly-pyramidal, female holly with light green foliage, was found at Auburn University.

North Carolina State University's arboretum is one of the best places to discover new cultivars. Dr. J. C. Raulston encourages nurserymen to observe and share with him the excitement of his work. He is generous and sharing, offering nurserymen cuttings of his selections. He routinely distributes worthy cultivars to nurserymen. *Cotoneaster dammeri* 'Skogholm', which he introduced to us, is one cultivar we produce because of its superior horticultural and cultural characteristics.

I have discovered pentas at Bellingrath Gardens, have seen *Cotoneaster horizontalis* 'Tom Thumb' at the Arnold Arboretum and have found many great azaleas growing at Callaway Gardens. These areas offer propagators great opportunities to expand their product lines.

Other nurseries. We don't always have to reinvent the wheel. If you are looking for good oleander cultivars, seek the advice of respected oleander growers. I found several good ones at Glen Saint Mary Nurseries. Lynn Taber, plantsman, propagator, and nurseryman was able to tell me his ideas about cold hardiness, blooming characteristics, and growth habits. I purchased a start of three cold-hardy oleanders to produce at Flowerwood.

I have also gone to Twisted Oak Nursery, Gilbert's Nursery, Duncan and Davies Nursery, Mitsch Gardens, Tom Dodd Nursery, Magnolia Nursery, Shadow Nursery, Appalachian Nursery, Monrovia Nursery, and others because they had attractive plant lists that included new and improved cultivars. I can take advantage of their experience and expertise by purchasing cultivars that they find superior.

Some cultivars I found at other nurseries include *Cornus florida* 'Weaver's White' and *C. florida* 'Stokes Pink,' variegated dwarf azaleas, 'Pink Cascade' azalea, *Hydrangea macrophylla* selections, selected viburnums, and seedlings of raphiolepis.

Wherever you go. Old neighborhoods, old towns, McDonald's restaurants, roadside parks, your neighbor's yard, your grand-

mother's yard, down on the river, or up on a mountain, down any road or trail, there might be a million-dollar plant waiting for you to discover it.

Country roads, private properties, and dirt roads all can yield very fine plants. I located a beautiful *Lonicera sempervirens* not three miles from my home on a country road. On Interstate 10 in Louisiana I found a dwarf southern wax myrtle, a 2½ ft. tall, dense female. On Interstate 20 in Texas I found one compact form of *Nandina domestica* that is rich green, compact, and stoloniferous. On Interstate 10 in Florida I found a witches' broom from the top of a wax myrtle that appears to be a ground cover when on its own roots. At Davis Grocery and Nursery on highway 98, Baldwin County, Alabama, I found a yellow-berried *Nandina domestica*.

Customers and Friends. Ask your customers for their ideas on new plants. Many times they can help you decide on what to grow that may be profitable for both of you. One example was Pete Pike's suggestion that we grow *Ilex crenata* '151' because it was his favorite. We did and are delighted with that decision. Many times my friends supply or tell me about great plants that they favor. The new thornless blackberry 'Navajo' (P.P. #6679) came from my friend Dr. J. N. Moore of the University of Arkansas.

Your own nursery. Look for particularly unique plants in your own nursery. Pick them out, set them aside. Grow, propagate, culture, observe, evaluate, and look for flaws. Propagate large numbers, show, talk about, name, trademark, patent, and license them. Then sell these new items and be pleased. Seedling populations offer the best chance to develop new, asexually-propagated clones of beauty.

Trade literature. Industry publications, university research and teaching professional books, trade magazines, retail mail-order catalogs, nursery catalogs, pricelists, trade shows, and industry associations, as well as industry gossip, are all good sources for new plants. 'Joseph Hill' azalea and 'Bababerry' raspberry (P. P. #4732) are just two examples of plants we learned about from such sources.

CONCLUSIONS

For the past ten years our company has advanced greatly by our willingness to seek out, evaluate, produce, and sell new and improved cultivars of hosta, hydrangea, Satsuki and hybrid azaleas, oleander, cotoneaster, holly hybrids, daylily, nandina, crape myrtle, rose hybrids, and more.

These items are of high economic value compared to basic plant groups. We have failed to develop some groups culturally including *Hedera helix*, *Pieris japonica*, and *Magnolia grandiflora*. Certainly better unusual plants with names and some packaging can be of greater value to the grower, retailer, and consuming public than regular or standard trade cultivars.