

## The Marketing of New Dwarf Conifers

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### INTRODUCTION

As you know, almost everybody can grow plants. The hardest thing in this business is getting rid of them at a decent profit—right? That's where marketing comes in. There are many aspects involved in marketing and I would like to share a few of those with you today.

### NICHE MARKETING

I call the type of marketing we do at Blue Sterling Nursery "Niche Marketing." We grow over 450 taxa of plants in many different sizes. We concentrate mainly on dwarf and slow-growing conifers but we also grow azaleas, Japanese maples, and Japanese hollies. However, even within the Japanese hollies we grow some unusual selections like *Ilex crenata* 'Dwarf Pagoda', 'Golden Helli', and a real nice dwarf called 'Piccolo'. These plants are not the mainstay of your typical production nursery. We have carved a small niche in a very large market.

### OUR APPROACH TO MARKETING

We have taken a unique approach to marketing. We don't advertise in any magazines or trade publications or at least haven't as of yet. To reach our clients, which are primarily garden centers, we rely heavily on trade shows, our catalog, great sales personnel, and word of mouth.

**Trade Shows.** Our main marketing method is through trade shows. We do seven trade shows a year, which is a lot for a small company. They cover our basic shipping area. We do the MANTS (Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show) in Baltimore during winter and summer, PANTS (Penn Allied Nursery Trade Show), PLANTS (Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Trade Show) in Pittsburgh, CENTS (Central Environmental Trade Show) in Columbus, New England Grows in Boston, and the New Jersey Nursery & Landscape Association Conference and Trade Show in Somerset.

As you know, it is extremely important to make a good impression at a show. Sometimes it is the only direct contact you will have with a buyer or owner. We always prearrange our booth design and use a wide variety of colors, textures, and sizes of plants. We don't have to force plants for the winter shows because conifers have great winter color. We take as many different cultivars as possible to the trade shows because in most cases if the customers see it and like it, they buy it. Even the best written descriptions are difficult to buy from if you're not familiar with the particular rewards or outstanding features of a certain cultivar. In addition, high quality is very difficult to express in a catalog.

We always stay until the end of the show, even the bad ones, because it only takes one good sale to make the show worthwhile. We also never take our best quality material to the shows, only the average stuff. That way if customers like what they see at a trade show, they will be thrilled to death when the order arrives. That philosophy has worked very well with almost no complaints in the spring.

**Catalog.** Another way we market Blue Sterling dwarf conifers is with our catalog. Often it is the first introduction of a company to a potential customer. It should be done as professionally as possible. Also it should be easy to read, have good descriptions, and I feel that having the correct botanical names and spelling is also extremely important. I include as much detailed information as I can find on each cultivar. This includes hardiness, growth habit, size after 10 years, color, texture, outstanding features, and the date of introduction, if possible. I also include some information on the genus and species and maybe its native area. I feel it is very important to put out a high quality catalog because it promotes the best image for a company.

**High Quality.** High quality is an over-worked, worn-out phrase. Everybody either has it or thinks they have. When we first started in 1983 there were many nurseries in the Bridgeton, Millville, and Deerfield areas of South Jersey. Now we have over 100 certified nurseries in Cumberland County alone. That's a lot of competition! I soon discovered that a buyer can always buy it for a quarter cheaper just down the road. So I decided that we were going to offer only true to name cultivars that were just a step above the rest and at a price that reflects the quality. I have been told by a few buyers that when they first saw our catalog they thought our prices were too high, but once they took a tour of our nursery and saw the superior quality of the plants, they gave us an order. Everybody won't spend the extra money for higher quality plants, but, again, we filled a small niche in the market.

**Quantity Produced.** As everyone here knows most plant material is easy to propagate. It is often much more difficult to know how many of a particular item the market will tolerate and what the next trend will be. We produce many cultivars but the quantities vary from as few as 30, for some really rare types, to as many as 3500 of the more common cultivars. The average is probably about 100 to 300 per cultivar. These numbers seem to be increasing as the trend towards low-maintenance gardening increases and we attract more customers.

## **SPOTTING A TREND**

In the marketing of plant material it seems there is always a cycle. One year there is a shortage of junipers, the next year everybody's got them for sale at a good price—if you are a buyer. The next year it's forsythia, then azaleas, and on and on. Interpreting these production cycles is further complicated by the development of trends to use different kinds of material, such as perennials, annuals, and so forth. Riding these trends can be both gratifying and profitable but they can be hard to predict.

One trend that is obvious to almost everybody is that of the small-sized building lot. People nowadays seem to have smaller yards than in the past. New style houses are larger in square feet than 50 years ago but they have first floor windows that are much closer to the ground, eliminating the need for large foundation plants. There has been an evolution of the buyer or gardener to locate a much wider diversity of plants for his or her landscape. They want plants with more color and less maintenance. Both perennials and dwarf conifers fill this need. We decided to concentrate our growing efforts on dwarf conifers. They come in many assorted forms like columnar, pyramidal, conical, prostrate, globose, and weeping, and they keep their shapes with a minimum amount of work. They can fill the needs of even the most discriminating customer. Dwarf conifers also come in many different

shades of green, yellow, purple, and even blue and silver, and they offer the gardener a multitude of textures and shapes and year-round color from which to choose.

### **DWARF—WHAT DOES IT MEAN**

The rate of growth is also very important. Everybody seems to want a plant that will grow to be 3 ft high and no more. In addition, they want it at an inexpensive price too. If anybody finds that variety please let me know. The term dwarf is often misunderstood. It means a plant that grows much slower than the species and its size is relative only to that species. It is confused by both the consumer and in the trade and with good reason. An example of this is the two *Chamaecyparis obtusa* cultivars 'Nana Gracilis' and 'Nana' one will grow to about 15 ft in 50 years the other only to about 3 ft. Both cultivars are considered dwarf Hinoki cypresses because the species will grow far taller.

### **TIME**

Due to the hectic, fast-paced lifestyle that we all lead nowadays, time has become very important. Anything that can save time is in great demand. That is why the service industries were thriving even during the past recession. Services like housecleaning, window washing, and fast food are very popular. You just don't see many fast food business going bankrupt very often.

People love to garden, it is one of the most popular pastimes, but they don't want to waste time every other weekend pruning the hedge anymore when they could be spending quality time with their family. A premium has been placed on time. So any plant that doesn't require much maintenance in the form of pruning, separating, spraying, or cleaning adds to the fun and enjoyment of gardening.

Dwarf and slow-growing conifers offer the consumer the best of both worlds—very low maintenance and good year-round color.

With all of this in mind it is easy to see why gardening with dwarf conifers has become more popular—not quite a major trend yet, just a nice niche market.