

Cultivar Mixes

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INTRODUCTION

Few things in life frustrate me more than buying mixed or misnamed plant cultivars. When was the last time you noticed a cultivar mix-up? If it's been more than a few months, then you should start looking ASAP. The professional credibility of our nurseries is at risk because we sell misnamed, and cultivar-mixed-up plants. Our employees are comfortable with things as they are. They do not even recognize mixed up or misnamed plant cultivars. Cultivar mix-ups have become so common in the industry that few nurseries are even trying to solve this "rapidly growing" problem.

Think About the Following Examples

- A landscape site is planted with specimen trees. After review it is determined that the trees are misnamed. The cost to replace these trees with the proper cultivar is thousands of dollars. Both the contractor and the property owner are upset with your company.
- A wholesale nursery has 50,000 boxwood plants die in the field from a hard winter. Then it discovers that every plant was misnamed. The true-to-name cultivar would have survived the winter conditions. After assessing lost plant sales at over 1 million dollars, the nursery owners are ready to sue. This suit is not only for lost sales but also for damaging the reputation of the nursery as a hardy boxwood supplier.
- A national chain store is changing suppliers because nursery inspectors noted that many plants sold by them were mixed, misnamed, and or mistagged. The store's credibility and good name are severely damaged after this problem is revealed on a national TV show about consumer fraud.

Lawyers can take these cases to court and win big money for their clients. The idea that nurseries are only liable for the plant purchase price is not true. Nurseries that sell misnamed or mixed plants are not having an accident, or experiencing an act of God, or just making a simple mistake. Your liability insurance is not going to cover your loss when they find out that you knew about the fraud all along. The size of this problem indicates that every nursery knows about it. As "nursery professionals," we can not say we did not know; it's our job to know. A lawyer can prove in court that these cultivar switches or mix-ups happen with the full knowledge of nursery management. Therefore, we and all nursery owners are at serious risk of losing our businesses in a lawsuit.

PLANT LIST—MIXED-UP PLANTS WE HAVE PURCHASED

In order to give you an idea of the size of this problem, I have compiled a shortened list of mixed-up plants we purchased for stock block planting at Spring Meadow Nursery Inc. in the last few years:

<i>Aronia arbutifolia</i> 'Brilliantissima'	All plants varied because they were propagated from a seedling block
<i>Berberis thunbergii</i> 'Atropurpurea Nana'	Many were rapid growers with a taller growth habit than true 'Atropurpurea Nana'
<i>Buddleja davidii</i> 'Dubonnet'	Mixed flower color
<i>Chaenomeles</i> × <i>superba</i> 'Cameo'	Some had white flowers instead of pink
<i>Cornus alba</i> 'Argenteo-Marginata'	Mixed with <i>Cornus alba</i> 'Variegata'
<i>C. sericea</i> 'Isanti'	Plants grew rapidly and were obviously not compact
<i>Hibiscus syriacus</i> 'cultivars'	Mixed colors in seven cultivars
<i>Ilex verticillata</i> 'Late Male'	Male plants with berries
<i>I. verticillata</i> 'Winter Red'	A mixture of four different cultivars none of which was 'Winter Red'
<i>Philadelphus</i> 'Minnesota Snowflake'	Some plants flowered single and some were double
<i>Potentilla</i> 'Gold Drop'	Every nursery is growing a different selection all with yellow flowers of course
<i>Rosa rugosa</i> cultivars	We bought four cultivars, each one was mixed by flower color
<i>Rhus aromatica</i> 'Konsa'	Plants were not uniform in habit or form
<i>Ribes alpinum</i> 'Green Mound'	Four plants out of 100 flowered and varied in habit
<i>Spiraea japonica</i> 'Shibori'	Every plant had only pink flowers
<i>S. japonica</i> 'Anthony Waterer'	Two completely different growth habits
<i>Syringa</i> 'Aladdin', 'Pocahontas', 'Isabella'	All three of these were mixed by flower color
<i>S. reticulata</i> 'Ivory Silk'	Fifteen out of 50 have a different branch structure, but it took more than 4 years to notice
<i>S. vulgaris</i> 'Madame Lemoine'	Many of these white lilacs had red flower buds
<i>S. vulgaris</i> 'Sensation'	Some had green dormant buds instead of red buds
<i>Taxus</i> × <i>media</i> 'Densiformis'	Every nursery is growing mixed up plants with big fat needles, calling them 'Densiformis'
<i>T. ×media</i> 'Runyon'	Mixed with other 'Densiformis' types
<i>Thuja occidentalis</i> 'Hetz Midget'	Mixed with a taller faster growing globe form
<i>Thuja occidentalis</i> 'Woodwardii'	Grew too tall and narrow for Woodwardii
<i>Viburnum dentatum</i> , Autumn Jazz™ viburnum	100% misnamed
<i>V. opulus</i> 'Compactum'	We received a selection of <i>V. trilobum</i> 'Compacta' that never flowered
<i>V. opulus</i> 'Roseum'	Only two out of 100 had a snowball type flower; the rest had a flat flower
<i>V. prunifolium</i> cultivar selection	25 identical plants of a cultivar turned out to be different seedlings
<i>V. plicatum</i> f. <i>tomentosum</i> 'Mariesii'	We received three different cultivars from three different sources

***V. plicatum f. tomentosum* 'Pink Beauty'**

Two sources, two different plants; one source had never even seen the plant flower

The above problems have been identified and corrected at Spring Meadow.

Please try to understand what could have happened if we did not bother to look at these plants on a continual basis. Every stock plant must be evaluated season by season and proven to be correctly named. Do not assume, I repeat, do not assume that the plants you buy are correctly labeled.

HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

Plant Cultivars Become Mixed up When Cuttings are Taken From:

- Plants growing in parks or yards.
- Plants growing at the nursery down the street.
- Plants bought at retail.
- Mixed stock plants.
- Plants grown from seed.
- Plant cultivars we have never seen before.
- Plants the nursery salesperson brought back from wherever.
- Plants that have not been verified as unmixed.
- Multiple sources which will almost always yield mixed material.

Cuttings are Mislabeled and Then Mixed up Because:

- Old tags are reused by writing on the other side.
- The writing on the tag has faded away so someone guesses at the cultivar name.
- "We don't label them, everyone knows what they are."
- The crew sticking the cuttings didn't know the plants were different.
- Every container, box, flat, or bundle wasn't tagged as it should have been.

Rooted Cuttings are Mixed During Pulling When We:

- Handle cultivars that look alike on the same day.
- Pick up cuttings from the floor when grading.
- Have a shortage and make a substitution.

Plants are Mixed at Planting Time When We:

- Handle too many cultivars at one time.
- Try to plant like-plants together instead of separating them.
- Forget to label at planting and try to do it later.
- Do a poor job of ending one cultivar before starting the next cultivar.

Plants are Mixed at Shipping Time When We:

- Ship more than one cultivar in a box.
- Label plant material after it gets to the loading dock.
- Substitute cultivars without proper tagging.
- Fail to properly separate cultivars in the truck because we can tell them apart.
- Buy plant material for reshipment without verifying its true name.

Plants Continue to be Mixed up Because No One will Throw Away Mixed-up or Misnamed Plants.

- "Let's take care of that cultivar mix-up next year, for now we just have to fill these orders."

- “I’m not going to worry about it because no one complains.”
- “We need 5000 of these so take cuttings from every plant we have, mixed or not.”
- “Sell it at a discount and get rid of it. Don’t you dare throw those away, that’s money.”
- “When those new cultivars come along we just change the names of the old stuff in our catalog.”
- “The customer decides to buy. If they don’t want it, they don’t have to buy it.”
- “The customer saw the product when we delivered it and they said it was ‘OK’ so who cares?”
- “If the customer can’t tell the difference, why should we care at the nursery?”
- “Our customers like this plant; we sell out of them every year.”

SOLUTION

What do we do as propagators to solve this problem?

- 1) Agree that we are responsible.
- 2) Assume that every plant we propagate from is mixed or mislabeled.
- 3) Refuse to propagate from mixed plants or unknown cultivars.
- 4) Hold nurseries to their guarantee that plants are true to name.
- 5) Refuse to sell plants that are mixed or mislabeled.
- 6) Change the way we work.