

Finding New Plants for the Market

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In a recent customer poll we found that 86% of our responding customers rely on new and unique plants to distinguish themselves from their competition and to improve their profit margins. As the Product Development Manager at Spring Meadow, my task is to find the new plants our customers demand. For me, no job could be as exciting. I love learning about plants. I appreciate the beauty they add to our lives. Finding a “diamond in the rough” plant that could someday be found in yards around the world, providing beauty and enjoyment, is the ultimate thrill. The plant hunting I do is more akin to detective work than exploration. Instead of touring China, I spend my time on the telephone, reading catalogs, thumbing through plant locators, attending seminars, visiting nurseries, hiking arboretums, and in front of a computer.

Reading nursery catalogs is my starting point for understanding what's in the market and for finding new plant leads. I read dozens of catalogs per week. I especially like foreign catalogs, specialty mail order catalogs, and plant listings of small nurseries. By shopping catalogs we've found some exciting plants like *Spiraea japonica* 'Neon Flash', *S. betulifolia* 'Tor', *Hypericum kalmianum* 'Ames', *Euonymus fortunei* BLONDY™ euonymus, and *Deutzia* 'Pink Minor'. A “new plant” need not be brand new. There are literally hundreds of outstanding plants out there but for whatever reason are not readily available in the trade. Obscure plants can find new life in today's market, if the timing is right and if they are properly marketed. Many of the hot “new” plants on the market today have been around for years. *Buddleja davidii* 'Dartmoor', *D. ×candida* var. *compacta*, *Hydrangea serrata* 'Bluebird', *Sambucus nigra* 'Pulverulenta', and *Caryopteris ×clandonensis* 'Worcester Gold' are all examples of older plants gaining new life.

Finding “brand new plants” is a different kind of plant hunting. These plants are often discovered by serious plant hounds, plant fanatics, or owners of small nurseries. Plant fanatics go crazy about a specific genus or a certain group of plants, like Jelena DeBelder who gave the world the wonderful plants *H. paniculata* 'Pink Diamond', 'Brussels Lace', and 'Kyushu', and many of our cultivars of *Hamamelis* too. These fun and exciting people often devote their lives to collecting, selecting, and hybridizing one genus. *Weigela florida* 'Alexandra' WINE & ROSES™ weigela came to us from Herman Geers. He's a Dutch nurseryman who has been hybridizing *Weigela* for nearly 20 years. His goal was to develop a truly dark purple-leaf cultivar. That's devotion!

Small nurseries are also great sources for new plants. Here the owner has direct contact with the plants. They do the weeding and pruning so the odds of finding a unique sport or seedling are better than at a larger nursery. *Itea virginica* 'Sprich' LITTLE HENRY™ sweetspire originated at just such a nursery. Rich Feist, the owner of Hummingbird Nursery discovered several sports of *I. virginica* on his stock plants. Fortunately he had the wherewithal to propagate and preserve these sports. The average nursery employee would have sheared them off, or shipped the plants out without even noticing the sport. Finding a plant with good commercial value is

rare. It takes a person with a sharp eye, a keen knowledge of plants, and patience. It requires time, devotion, propagation skills, good record keeping, and good luck. We owe our respect to these people for the diversity of cultivars we enjoy today.

Finding these plant originators and their new plants is not an easy task and requires a lot of research. What we try to do is make it easy for them to find us. Our marketing, public relations, and advertising all focus on new flowering shrubs. We have had plant originators in Europe contact us based on one of our ads and/or catalog. We have let the word out that we are a good place to bring a new flowering shrub. That we will treat our originators fairly. We let them know that we have the focus, the facility, the capital, the customer base, the marketing tools, and the distribution system necessary to properly introduce flowering shrubs.

Whenever anyone brings us a plant we must objectively evaluate the chances of its success. The renown plantsmen J.C. Raulston once offered me the following criteria as a way to estimate the potential success of a new plant. When evaluating a new plant find, I ask myself the following questions:

- Is the plant truly ornamental?
- Does it have garden center appeal?
- Can it be economically propagated?
- Can it be economically grown?
- Is the plant an improvement over the cultivars currently being sold?
- Does the plant have multiple seasons of ornamental interest?
- Does the plant serve a new or unique function in the landscape?

If a new plant scores well against these criteria, we might consider protecting the plant. If the plant was discovered in a cultivated state it can be patented. If the plant was found in nature, it cannot be patented. The patenting and trademarking of plants remains controversial especially for woody plants and perennials. Some feel that serendipitous plant discoveries should not be protected. I don't understand this logic. Who faults DuPont for patenting nylon? Originators should be rewarded for their efforts by means of protection regardless if it is intentional or accidental. This provides incentive to develop new plants. The upsetting thing about plant protection is not the royalty per say. It's the exclusivity and/or the lack of value associated with these plants. Our philosophy is that licensing should be readily available. More nurseries growing and selling a plant benefits the originator, the industry, and the public. It also contributes to the overall success of the plant. A royalty should also add value to a plant. That's why we insist that a percentage of the royalty goes toward marketing and education. This too benefits the originator, the licensees, retailers, and the overall success of the plant.

Perhaps someday you are fortunate enough to discover a truly unique and marketable new plant. If so, you need to be very careful especially if you hope to protect your plant. The following list should provide help.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU DISCOVER A NEW PLANT

- Don't sell any plants! You only have 1 year from the date of the first U.S. sale to file for a patent.
- Don't distribute the plant without a signed trailing agreement. We never accept a plant without providing the originator with this basic and essential protection.

- Don't expect to get rich. Just look at the patent book and see how many plants you recognize. Very few I suspect. Greed will ruin friendships and make your life miserable.
- Consider partnering with a nursery with the means to properly evaluate, propagate, grow, distribute, and market your plant. Many good plants remain obscure because the originator did not have the means to properly introduce the plant. Properly introducing a new plant is expensive. For example, we've spent over \$10,000 developing *W. florida* 'Alexandra' WINE & ROSES™ weigela and we haven't shipped a single plant as of yet.
- When looking for a partner, look for someone who specializes in the category of plant you have. We specialize in flowering shrubs and have the ability to properly introduce a new flowering shrub. If someone brings us a perennial, we tell the originator that its not in his or her best interest to have Spring Meadow introduce. We would try to put the originator in touch with a perennial specialist, even if we saw that the plant had great commercial potential.
- Consider partnering with a propagation nursery. Propagation nurseries have the ability to get plants to market quickly and to distribute across a wide geographic area. Finishing nurseries often want to keep new plant exclusive to themselves. This may limit the availability of your plant and your potential returns.
- Be patient and realistic. It takes many years for a new plant to come to market and few plants have what it takes to be a hit.

New plants are an important part of the nursery business. They're a fun, exciting, and profitable part of our business. New plants help keep garden centers exciting and profitable. Best of all, new plants keep our landscapes, gardens, and homes beautiful, fun, exciting, and ever-changing!