

## Planning For Successful Plant Promotion

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### INTRODUCTION

In the last 6 years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of large-scale co-ordinated plant promotions and these now account for 40% of Farplants' total sales. As the retail market becomes increasingly competitive garden centre buyers, who are already spoiled for choice, will become much more selective. Inferior promotions will quickly fall by the wayside but those which have been well planned will stand the test of time. As garden centre groups and multiples continue to expand, so too will the demands on their suppliers. Therefore, those growers who do not gear up to supply top quality, well-marketed plants in real volume and on time, will get left out in the cold.

### DECIDING WHAT TO PROMOTE

Plants don't have to be new to make successful promotions. Indeed most of Farplants' best sellers are traditional popular subjects such as lupins and hollyhocks. Our success at promotions has been a result of combining fashionable old favourites that the market is hungry for with good new or little known cultivars.

In the future however, first-class new cultivars will become more important to our increasingly competitive market and only first-class ones will stand any chance of long-term success. It is not the case that there is a fortune to be made from every new discovery.

When deciding whether or not to proceed with a new plant, you must ask the following questions:

- Is this genus trendy and on the increase like *Nemesia*, or is it already over-done like *Penstemon*?
- Can it be sold in bud and flower to increase the chance of impulse sales?
- Does it have a long period of interest?
- Can it be presented in an appealing way in a pot? *Alstroemerias* look superb in the garden but tend to shoot unevenly as young plants on the nursery.
- Is this species fairly easy to grow in volume?

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THOROUGH TRIALLING

The recent hunger for new cultivars has sometimes resulted in trialling being less thorough than it should have been. Initial trialling establishes the potential of a new cultivar but volume commercial trialling must follow. We would usually grow 1000 to 2000 of a cultivar but if we are testing several different composts or propagation windows then trial numbers may run into many thousands. Be absolutely confident so that when you play the real numbers game it doesn't end in disaster. A full year of commercial trialling could save a lot of money.

As larger buying groups demand greater volumes within narrower delivery windows, the pressure on crop timing will intensify further. With increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, growers may have to invest in such innovations as removable

walk-in cloches for new crops. When Walberton Nursery launched the new *Spiraea japonica* 'Magic Carpet', these cloches enabled despatch of 30,000 plants in a 7-day window.

It is also vital to conduct garden performance trialling in parallel with the nursery trials on secure sites in other parts of the country.

### **AVOID MARKET PEAKS**

Sixty percent of Farplants' turnover happens during a 10-week spring period when up to 35 lorryloads a day leave our distribution centre. So if a new plant can be sold at other times of the year this has to be an advantage, even at the expense of some volume. In June and July 1996 we sold 50,000 *Oenothera* 'Siskiyou'.

### **GET THE PRODUCTION TARGET RIGHT**

Think very carefully before you set production targets for new plants. Never be tempted to go mad just because it roots like a weed. Also resist any pressure from the breeder to grow thousands more of their wonderful new cultivar than you know you can realistically sell. After all, any wastage will be yours to swallow. At Farplants we first decide how many plants should be in a collection (i.e., 12 trays of 8 1-litre pots). Then we calculate how many outlets are likely to buy this promotion, to include independent garden centres, garden centre groups, and multiples, if applicable. For the major promotions we may grow an extra 30% for top-ups so that larger retailers can run the promotion for a few weeks.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD PHOTOGRAPHY**

Good quality photography is another vital ingredient in the success of a plant promotion but the general standard of many pictures published is appalling. Printers are now equipped with all the latest technology but they cannot print miracles from inferior transparencies.

A few slides should be taken early on in the trialling of new plants. This will at least give designers some sort of reference should you wish to make an early start at working-up point of sale promotional designs. Too much horticultural printing is done from 35 mm snapshots taken by the breeder or nurseryman. If you want good printing results then you must commission medium format transparencies taken by a professional photographer. As a guide we would expect to pay a photographer up to £300 to achieve what we want for a particular subject.

Plants must be set aside in good time. They should be well spaced and, in the case of tall items like hollyhocks, supported. Small blemishes tend to become accentuated on film, so the flowers must be in perfect condition when photographed.

The correct choice of background is essential, but it seems that few people in the trade have realised this yet. We regularly take plants to Highdown Gardens at Worthing where there is a good choice of backgrounds, not to mention shelter from the wind. I am certain that if the public view pictures of plants in a proper garden setting then they are more likely to subconsciously think "yes that would look good at home" and make that all important purchase.

Be careful, too, that the background contrasts with the plant. If you photograph small flowers and foliage like *Saxifrage* 'Silver Cushion', don't set them against gravel like we did. Put them in front of bold-leaved plants like blue-leaved hostas or purple cordylines.

Make sure that you get plenty of shots taken and preferably from more than one angle. Then you will always be able to offer your publicity contacts a choice. Over the past 6 years we have added more than 2000 slides at a cost of about £8000 to our library. This is now housed in a £700 fire-proof safe. Do be sure to brief the photographer about the shape of picture you want, whether it be horizontal, square, or upright. It is no good having a super square transparency to fit a long oblong picture window in the label.

### **CHOOSING A GOOD NAME**

We all know the importance of choosing the right name for a new plant. It can make the difference between success or failure. Short, simple names that don't have to relate to a plant's flower colour or foliage, can be most effective. When Pershore College held a naming competition for their variegated *Ceanothus*, of the 400 suggestions received, only 30 or so avoided the word blue. We chose 'Zanzibar' as it had a tropical feel about it and, being a single word would fit well into our point-of-sale designs. It had also, to the best of our knowledge, not been used before.

### **EFFECTIVE, POINT OF SALE DESIGN**

Your new plant may be good but you have to get this message across to the public. As around 80% of all plant purchases are on impulse, then those designs which catch the eye will win the day. With *S. japonica* 'Magic Carpet' we all knew it was a great cultivar. However, the *Spiraea* market was already crowded so we decided to omit the genus name completely and turn it into a fun purchase. Many retailers reported it as their best selling promotion this spring. We sold 130,000 in 7 weeks and left the market still hungry. So don't be afraid to dispense with convention when you face design decisions.

If you can't bring yourself to be this radical then at least make the design bold and simple and allow as big an area as possible for the picture. Make the bullet points of information short and to the point. They are only there to reassure the customer. Once the sale is made then the plant label will do the rest.

### **GET THE LABELLING RIGHT**

Bespoke labelling has come a long way since *Scabious* 'Butterfly Blue' was launched 12 years ago. However, many growers still resent paying a little extra for exclusivity and settle for cheaper off-the-shelf labelling. Product differentiation will become even more vital in the increasingly competitive market. One sure way of making your new plant stand out is with effective bespoke labelling.

This was the thinking behind the labels for Farplants' "Tasty Patio Herb" labels. As competition in the herb market increased from small family-run nurseries, the only way Farplants could survive was to make our product look different. Mike Tristram, our herb grower, came up with the idea of showing a cartoon French chef on the label. I was always opposed to labels without photographs but as herbs are, on the whole, fairly unphotogenic, I knew the chef idea would be a winner. Garden centres that changed over to this presentation reported an increase in sales of up to 25%.

When commissioning bespoke labels be sure to temper your designer's artistic flair with practical application. Make sure labels are easy to insert, with no

sharp corners which could annoy nursery staff or put the public off buying them. Don't hide the retail price like we did on our first version of the 'Magic Carpet' label. Don't give gardeners an excuse not to buy. The back of a label is important too. Provide as full a description as space will allow but don't make the type too small.

### **MAKING THE MOST OF PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Horticulture is beginning to realise the significant role that publicity can play in a plant's success. I recently attended a public relations training day which was specifically aimed at our sector and was horrified to discover there were only five other people present.

With increasing competition we will need to create demand from the consumer, but this is no easy thing. I believe that branding is still not truly relevant unless backed by significant financial investment which, I don't believe, our margins will allow. Pride of Place tried hard for several years, but the message never really got home to the consumer. Instead we have to invest time and effort targeting the media in the hope that we can influence consumer demand.

At Farplants we have a four-pronged attack. Firstly, we regularly contact all the main garden writers — but make sure you do this well in advance. Once new promotions are launched to the trade in September, we mail to about 40 writers, enclosing a copy of the new promotions catalogue. This allows plenty of lead time before publication of spring issues of magazines. The Horticultural Trades Association has published a very useful list of garden writers which is well worth the cost.

Exposure at shows such as Chelsea can create enormous demand especially if timed with delivery into garden centres. For those like us who have no retail identity, try linking up with one of the specialist nurseries who regularly win medals. We have found this to be a very beneficial symbiotic relationship.

Another angle is to offer new plants to garden writers for trialling in advance of your release date. This can be difficult to administer, but will enable writers to write from their own personal experiences.

Of course, we must not forget the trade press who usually come at the top of most growers' publicity hit-list. However, as a former retailer, I have a feeling that many planteria managers rarely get to see current editions of the trade press. Still, it is a valuable way of letting the competition know what you are up to.

### **TRADE LAUNCH**

Most leading nurseries launch their promotions in September at the GLEE retail exhibition or at the Four Oaks nursery trades exhibition. It is essential to have a good quality brochure for the launch so that the sales team can focus effectively and efficiently at securing next year's business. Start work on point-of-sale designs in plenty of time so you can feature everything in this brochure. Think ahead so that you have the right photographs to show. We take pictures up to a year in advance of publishing to achieve what we want. Spend as much as you can on the printing. Our brochure costs several thousand pounds but after all, it does represent more than £3 million turnover.

**COSTS OF EFFECTIVE PROMOTION**

Here are a couple of examples to illustrate just how much it costs to get a Farplants promotion off the ground:

	Single-cultivar promotion 20,000 plants	Four-cultivar promotion 100,000 plants
Photography	£100	£350
Label origination	£50	£200
Brochure cost @ £400 per page	£130	£200
P.O.S. design (existing house style)	£90	£250
P.O.S. artwork and origination	£100	£480
Chromalin colour proof (full size)	FOC	£70
P.O.S. printing	£270	£1155
Exhibition costs	£100	£ 250
Label printing	£1000	£5000
Total	£1840	£7955
Per plant	9.2p each	7.95p each