

Challenges of introducing new plants[©]

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INTRODUCTION

New plant introductions are the lifeblood of the ornamental horticulture industry. Growers and retailers at all points in the supply chain can gain commercial advantage and retain customer interest by continuously improving and updating their product range by offering novel crops. New introductions can offer other advantages too, such as reduced production costs and faster production times.

It is important for breeders and introducers of new plants to understand the most important elements for success.

ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS

A good plant

It may seem obvious, but the first and most important element of the new plant introduction process is to ensure that the plant is good. If the plant has been developed in-house, then it is vital to conduct an effective evaluation and small-scale production trial before committing to volume production. If the variety has been developed externally, then in-house trials or review of production by third parties will help to determine the qualities of the plant. Naturally, it pays to be cautious – experience shows that whilst a plant may perform in one way at one nursery, it can perform quite differently in a different nursery that employs different media, structures, pest control, etc.

The new introduction should be distinct and offer something that your existing product range does not—but that does not mean that your new plant programme should be limited to blue roses and black hyacinths. Plants that are incremental improvements on existing varieties can offer more subtle advantages in product performance and production characteristics that may not be obvious at first glance—but those advantages may be enough to make the plant easier to sell or more efficient to produce.

What's the story?

The choice of new plants in the market today is greater than it has ever been. So, it is important to consider the story that goes with the new plant that you intend to launch. This can be harder with introductions that offer only incremental improvements over existing plants, but it is not impossible.

You should consider the benefits that makes the plant attractive to your customers (and potentially to your customer's customers). But you should also look for other aspects of the story. For example, messages like "Bred in the UK" work well for certain audiences—clearly that message would work well in the United Kingdom, but it can also work well in other markets (for example: Germany, where British origin is associated with quality).

Other stories that might help to promote the plant could include:

- The new cultivar is the first of its kind.
- The breeder is donating royalties to charity.
- The breeder has a particularly good reputation or is well-known.
- The plant has environmental benefits (reduced chemical use, reduced heating requirement, and pollinator friendly).

Ensure the supply chain is in place

No matter how much of the production process you deal with in-house (and with more vertical integration in our industry, it is increasingly common for growers to carry out

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multiple stages of the production process within a single organisation, even if not at a single location), your new cultivar launch will not involve your own organisation in isolation. You will need to consider all players in the supply chain, both suppliers to you and those that you supply.

Ensure that you have the supply of young plant material that you need. This may mean working with a young plant grower or unrooted cutting supplier to ensure that they have mother stock in place. These suppliers may be in third countries. Be sure to understand if there are exclusivity arrangements in place, perhaps with territorial limitations—and, if not, try to understand the extent of supply to other players in your market. You may need to work with the breeder or breeder's agent to ensure that the correct licensing is in place.

Discuss the new cultivar with your key clients. Will they support you with promotion? Would offering a limited exclusive arrangement help to get their support and marketing effort? There is little value in offering a great new plant if you do not have customers who will buy it.

Often the breeder of the new plant, particularly if they have engaged an agent, will be involved in this process. Agents will frequently work in cooperation with growers and retailers to ensure that the supply chain is in place from end-to-end, including having some sort of “plan B” if things go wrong.

Communication is key

Just about the most important aspect of any new product launch is communication. Ensure that internal communication within your organisation is effective. Even more importantly, ensure that communication with the other organisations in the supply chain is effective. Be sure that you know who is involved and what their roles and responsibilities are. The breeder or their agent can have a role to play here in coordinating communication, but this will only work if everyone cooperates—and cooperation is not a strong point in the horticulture industry! Don't wait until the situation has gone horribly wrong before speaking up—if there is a potential problem on the horizon, talk to the breeder or their agent and to the other people in the supply chain. It is in their interests to work with you to find a solution and they will have increased confidence with you if you are honest. Failure to be honest and a disaster that can be blamed on you means that their confidence in your organisation will be lost and you will find it harder to be involved with future new plant launches.

Getting the message out there

It is likely that, during the development and build-up stages, the new product launch will remain confidential to those parties that are directly involved in it. However, the time will come when you need to begin shouting loudly about what you are doing—and there is likely to be a role and benefits for every party in the supply chain. To be seen to be connected to a successful new plant launch can enhance your organisation's reputation.

Firstly, be sure who is coordinating promotion and publicity and what everyone's role is. Often, coordination will be done by the breeder or their agent, but it may also be done by a retailer or wholesale grower. Have clear and agreed embargo dates for information.

Your marketing and promotion can include many different elements:

- Point of sale materials: plant labels, bed cards, posters. Think outside the box to set yourself apart from the crowd.
- Websites, social media—not just to promote the plant, but also to build community and to share information (such as cultural advice, supplier details, launch dates).
- Trade shows—IPM Essen, Plantarium, Four Oaks, and National Plant Show.
- New plant competitions, awards and trials—take care with novelty rules for new plant competitions, which can be arcane.
- Retail shows—focus on the shows with the biggest media presence like RHS Chelsea Flower Show (probably the best opportunity worldwide).
- Press contacts—it might be useful to employ a specialist PR agency.

What can go wrong?

Things will go wrong. Planning ahead will go a long way to avoiding problems, but we are dealing with a living product, so inevitably there is always something unexpected. Consider the following:

- Supply and supply chain problems—it is not always possible to quickly switch suppliers if there is a problem, but for non-exclusive product it can sometimes be possible. The breeder or breeder's agent may be able to help with this.
- Production and post-sale performance problems—it is important to conduct proper evaluation and production testing. Does the plant require a cold period to flower? Is it winter hardy? Are there unusual pest or disease issues?
- Not having enough plants—this might seem a nice problem to have, but your plant is only “new” once and you need to maximise the opportunity. You are unlikely to get those missed sales next year as, by then, the attention of customers might have moved on to the next novelty. Don't be tempted by a “soft launch” to avoid risk—once you launch, all the publicity and media opportunities that go with a new product will have been lost as it is no longer new. Avoiding risk generally means missing reward.
- Failures in communication—the least excusable of errors and the easiest to avoid! Crop running two weeks late due to a cool spring? Tell someone!
- Somebody else launches something similar before you launch your plant—the hardest problem to avoid. There are three options when this happens: tough it out and go for your launch regardless; scale back your launch; scrub your launch entirely. Once you become aware of a competing product, talk to the other parties in the supply chain, particularly the breeder or agent, and decide on the best way forward. Things will go wrong. Learn from your mistakes.

But when it all goes well...

There are so many benefits for your organisation in launching new plants; including competitive advantage, increased sales, enhancement of reputation, improved relationships with suppliers and customers. It can even help with recruitment if you are seen to be a market leader. Market leaders tend also to attract more new product opportunities because success breeds success. Putting the best procedures in place with an enthusiastic approach will help to ensure the best possible outcomes.

