

The relatively recent emergence of perennials as a floraculture crop has impacted the industry far beyond giving it an ever-expanding set of new names to learn. Perennials have enabled growers to get better use from their facilities, extend their sales seasons and offer customers more buying flexibility. They've inspired a new generation of consumers and opened the door to a whole host of marketing possibilities.

by Miriam Young

Plentiful, but know-how paramount

Since they first started to become commercially available in the early 1980s, perennials have transformed many growers' business models. With a more flexible growing season than annuals they can occupy otherwise unused greenhouse time. Blooming times typically range from April through till August, giving an entire summer of sales opportunities. While retailers are ever more cautious about advance ordering, perennials provide a less time-critical crop than annuals. The availability of colourful pot tags means plants can go to retail at any development stage up till flowering. More developed plants can be sold for more, so growers get higher returns for increased time investment. There's no need

to stress about clearing stock within a short window as plants can continue growing until retailers are ready to call them in. Unlike annuals, perennials have no ultimate sell-by date. Any that remain unsold after blooming can be over-wintered and grown again the following year when their larger size will command a higher price tag. Alternatively, they can be split to make two plants - assuming of course that no patent protection applies to the variety concerned!

Perennial challenges

At the same time, perennials have presented growers with new challenges. Such a diverse range of plants calls for diversity in growing conditions. Choosing appropriate varieties and treating them right

requires knowledge.

With a steady stream of new varieties, different presentations and inventive marketing continuing to fuel interest, perennial popularity is still on the rise. While the rapid development of the perennials market has proved profitable for many, its sustainability is being brought into question. One of the world's leading suppliers, De Vroomen Holland, believes the market's future will be dependent on growers making dramatic improvements in the way they produce plants.

Watching market develop

De Vroomen Holland was among the first wholesale suppliers to offer perennials and has witnessed many changes in the last 25 years. Account manager Eric Olson recalls how the selection in those early days didn't go far beyond a handful of peonies, daylilies, hostas and rudbeckias. "They used to be sold as bare roots in bags of peat, wrapped up in a fancy cardboard sleeve. The sales season was over by the end of May. But when growers realized they could supply retailers with pot grown plants the whole thing really began to take off." "This created a longer sales season which delighted everybody. Consumers were keen to have these 'easy-care' plants that would live year after year in their gardens, retailers had customers in their stores right through the summer and growers were making easy money. Breeders began introducing new varieties that capitalized on the interest and by the 1990s the perennials industry was on a roller coaster of success. All you



A test garden planted with samples from shipments to monitor quality; Guus Boon conducts an inspection.

had to do was put the word 'new' on a plant and it would sell."

25 years and several thousand varieties later, today's perennials market is almost unrecognizable. Genera have been developed to satisfy every need. There are plants for sun, plants for shade, plants for wet, dry, hot or cold. Breeders have created varieties that are tougher, faster-growing, heavier flowering and with colours that Mother Nature hadn't thought of. Many varieties are bred specifically for qualities that facilitate efficient distribution and better impulse sale.

The knowledge gap

With such a wealth of choice comes the need for knowledge. Olson recalls how little was known about perennials when they first hit the commercial scene. "All perennials were considered as a single category. Nobody realized that different plants needed different conditions in order to thrive." Much has changed since then. But while consumers have lapped up information offered via magazines, websites, gardening clubs and even garden centre staff, many growers are lacking the knowledge needed to get the most from their crops. Olson and his colleagues at De Vroomen often encounter growers who still try to treat all perennials the same, just as was done in those early days. Apparently unaware of the need for different soils, amounts of water, light levels and planting depths, they experience quality problems and crop failures which can be disastrous in today's economy. "In those boom times in the 1990s it was so easy to sell



Eric Olson, account manager De Vroomen Holland, improving his own product knowledge. He explains why improved grower knowledge is paramount to future success.

that attention to detail took a back seat," says Olson. "But today things are different. Retailers demand better quality, so poorly presented product no longer sells. At the same time margins are being squeezed so growers can't afford to make mistakes."

Working partners

Of course the answer to this lies in growers being better educated in perennial crop production. As a company, De Vroomen believes it's the suppliers' responsibility to provide this and goes to great lengths to do so. Knowledge gathered through observations in their trial gardens and experimental research carried out in conjunction with universities is passed on via sales

people to customers, helping those who take it on board to enjoy better success rates.

"Our continued existence as a company relies upon the success of our customers," says Olson. "We need them to still be there tomorrow, and that means we need to provide continual support. Our account managers therefore don't just sell, they act as personal advisors assisting growers from start to finish, from choosing the most suitable varieties to explaining how to get the best results. It's not as simple as saying '*you live in zone 5, grow these*', different grower facilities may present different conditions so we need to work with each individual customer as an individual project. Yes, there >>>

Perennials



De Vroomen grows new introductions for a few years to test for quality and research growing habits before releasing to production.

is a lot of work involved, but the perennials market still offers so much potential that the long-term rewards are worth the effort.”

Size does matter

In today’s margin-conscious environment, many growers are being lured into purchasing very small starter material to reduce costs. But Olson believes this is a false economy and has a warning note for the industry. “A plant still needs time to grow. If you force a big plant quickly out of a tiny plug you may end up with lots of attractive top growth, but there’ll be no root structure.” In other words, you’ll get a plant that looks good in the retail store but has a higher chance of dying after the consumer gets it home. The long-term consequences for the industry aren’t good!

Of course you can get quality plants from small plugs if you grow them longer. But Olson believes this is another false economy. “For some reason many growers forget to factor in the cost of the additional care and energy needed to grow small starter stock

into well-developed plants. They probably don’t make any more profit from doing this. My advice to growers who want efficiency and profitability is to buy bigger. The success rate from a good-sized bare root is considerably better than from a 128 cell plug, and when you add up the real cost to produce the finished plant there’s probably not much to split them.” In fact Olson is so convinced of this argument that he is working together with Cornell University on researching the relative costs and qualities of crop production using different starter materials. Conclusive figures are anticipated in about a year’s time, which will make very interesting reading for the industry!

Longer term view

De Vroomen has remained a voice of reason in an industry that got carried away on its own success. Their catalogue only contains varieties they have independently judged to be reliable in commercial production. While some ride the hype of anything that’s new, De Vroomen prefers to wait till a

plant proves itself. “We get a lot more long-term satisfied customers that way!” says Olson. “Take the Meadowbright Echinaceas for example. Everybody was falling over themselves to put these out. It got produced too quickly and the markets became flooded with sub-standard crops. This resulted in a backlash and everybody said the varieties were no good. While all this was going on we continued to grow the Meadowbrights and have found that if you take the time to produce a good sized root, these are truly magnificent plants. We are therefore pleased to offer them, despite the fact that their industry reputation was damaged due to those early production mistakes.” But that doesn’t mean De Vroomen never has anything new to offer. They’re just more selective about their choices. For 2010 they are introducing four Oriental Poppies bred by Dutch Poppy specialist Eleonore De Koning, Little Patty Plum, Marlene, Paradiso and Rococo. There’s also an Astilbe hybrid that boasts excellent uniformity, rich colouring and unusually attractive foliage. |||