

Unique Methods for Marketing New Plants

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Mitsch Nursery is a wholesale liner propagation nursery. Our product gives us both a responsibility and an advantage concerning new plant introductions.

It is our responsibility to introduce new plants in such a way as to create a market for these new introductions and to have sufficient stock to supply this created market.

We have an advantage that allows us to make many more introductions than most nurseries. When we find a plant with definite merit for the home owner and the grower, we can have that plant in our catalog in just a few years. If we discover a new plant, we can first produce it in small quantities for evaluation purposes, thus saving considerable capital investment, and still shift into heavy production for immediate release in only one additional year.

Let me first mention a few facts about why we are able to introduce many new plants before I explain how we introduce and market them.

One particular plant that we recently introduced through Mitsch Nursery was *Pinus virginiana* 'Wate's Golden'. This plant is quite rare and hard to find, even in the collections of avid conifer enthusiasts. 'Wate's Golden' is light green in the summer but turns a bright gold in the winter. Fast-growing and hardy, it has wide climatic and soil tolerances. When we moved to Oregon in 1986, I brought a three foot tall plant plus ten new grafts with me. By grafting any available wood each year and by keeping most of the propagations, in four years we had sufficient stock to do over three hundred grafts of this cultivar. Since we were not selling mature plants, we were able to offer it to our customers immediately.

When I discover a mature plant with merit in an arboretum and if I can obtain about 25 scions, we can usually offer that plant in four years or less. For example, I discovered an outstanding specimen of *Picea abies* 'Inversa' growing in an eastern arboretum. For some reason this striking plant was not readily available in the trade. I obtained scions from this tree over a three year period and offered it on a wholesale basis the fourth year.

Having the ability and the desire to offer new selections, this presented us with the problem of creating a market for these relatively unknown plants.

The most obvious starting point was with the Mitsch Nursery catalog since it best represented our product, including new introductions. A full color front cover and a half-color back cover were utilized to attract attention, and one of the photos is usually a new introduction.

Inside the catalog we have always used brief descriptions of all of our offerings to give a general idea of how each plant grows, its color, and its hardiness. To make this catalog an attractive production that would encourage a customer to page through it, we use two colors of ink for highlighting important items on a page, and we have commissioned a local artist to do pen and ink sketches of plants found on the nursery. These sketches are reproduced on high quality paper and are suitable for framing.

We also offer a line of reference books for sale through our catalog. Not only does this increase interest in our catalog, but it also gives our customers a fine source of reference books that cover our products.

Another means of education is the nursery trade show. We started with a local trade show and decided to do one other show each year in another part of the country. At each trade show we have a selection of new plants that we are offering, or that we will be listing in the next year or two.

The new plants do attract the attention of attendees, but we also utilize other features to draw people to our booth so that they will see our material. At the local trade show large pieces of ceramic art created by an artist friend and intended for utilization in the garden enhance the display. We felt that merely cramming plants into the booth area worked against our goals. Playing a video of our plant offerings also attracts the attention of passersby.

A good newsletter is an invaluable tool for educating our customers. The biggest challenge with a newsletter is enticing people to read it. In general, newsletters are treated as "junk mail", especially when they deliver a hard sales pitch. We produce an informative newsletter that has been well received and has proven to be profitable.

Our newsletter, *Mitsch-Coenosium Notes*, is produced in-house on the nursery's computer with myself as the sole author and my wife, a former high school English teacher, as proof-reader. The writing is done on Wordperfect, a word processor, and the layout is accomplished with Ventura, a desktop publishing program, both of which are also used to do our catalog.

The heart of the newsletter is always an attention-getting article. Just a few of the articles written include *Plants For Bonsai*, *Weeping Hemlocks*, *Golden Conifers*, *How To Graft*, and several devoted to gardens and arboreta of the United States and Europe.

A soft-sell sales approach is utilized throughout each newsletter. A book special is featured in each issue with a generous discount given off the retail price. A section of plant specials always occupies the last page. The plant specials and book special have never failed to generate substantial income for the nursery.

The autumn edition of the newsletter is mailed a few weeks before our catalog. This edition features new plants being introduced for the first time. Plants are listed with their descriptions, thus giving the customer advance notice of new introductions.

Landscaped gardens are a feature of Mitsch Nursery that have attracted considerable attention and generated additional sales. Over 1800 assorted conifer cultivars are in the Mitsch Nursery collection. Many of these cultivars are planted in the gardens and most are not known to our customers. Visitors at the nursery see our new offerings in landscaped situations and will often add some of these plants to their orders.

Our new cultivars attract many visitors to the nursery. The gardens also have quite a few grafted oddities and a variety of ceramic art forms scattered throughout the plantings which elicit considerable comment. Visitors touring the gardens often encourage others to visit the nursery and see the collections, thus giving us potential new customers.

We also generate a market for our new introductions by creating a demand for new plants among retail customers. We use a number of different techniques to generate this interest.

I aggressively seek speaking engagements for meetings of various plant societies. In my presentations I use slides of unique plants being offered for sale through Mitsch Nursery.

Periodically I will write an article for a horticultural publication that encourages the use of special plants that are available from Mitsch Nursery. The magazine is either one published for the general public or one associated with a particular plant society.

Plant donations to arboreta or other public gardens go very far in generating public demand for finer plants. Mitsch Nursery donates plants to arboretum auctions, such as the annual auction by the Arnold Arboretum. We make outright gifts of plants to a number of arboreta, especially new cultivars we are promoting.

Although we do not give plants to just any arboretum, we do allow any arboretum or public garden to purchase less than wholesale quantities at wholesale prices.

Getting new cultivars into locations where they may be seen by the general public is an excellent way to generate a demand for these plants. There is some risk of propagation material being stolen from any plant in a public location, but that risk is far outweighed by the benefits of public exposure to the plant.

I am certain that many others have utilized one or more of the marketing techniques described up to this point. The last two marketing techniques are my most unique ones.

In the past year I have made two high quality video tapes that have proven to be very successful. The first was a video catalog of Mitsch Nursery grafted conifers showing all 172 of the conifers we produce by grafting with scenes of mature plants, close-ups of foliage, and detailed descriptions of their growth and landscape uses. This video has increased sales for the nursery, both directly from customers and indirectly from consumers, both of whom have seen it.

The second is an instructional video on how to graft, and it is also selling quite well. As a former educator I was able to draw upon my classroom experiences in its production. It has not had a direct influence on sales, but it has added to the reputation of the nursery.

A video tape is an excellent selling tool. Its major drawback is cost. Each of my tapes is approximately two hours long and should have cost anywhere from \$10,000 to as much as \$30,000 to complete. I have done each tape for only a fraction of those figures. Hiring a camera crew is very expensive. Instead I purchased a high quality video camera and did all of my own filming on high quality tape. Studio time for editing costs a minimum of \$50.00 per hour, and ordinarily several hours of time is used for each minute of finished tape. I greatly reduced my edit time by assisting in the studio and being well prepared so the production cost of the 3/4" edit master tape was very reasonable.

Coenosium Gardens is a retail business that sells rare and unusual plants to retail customers and collectors. It is my personal business, and it purchases its plants from Mitsch nursery for resale only. Most of the plants are sold mail order, but I do have a small area on Mitsch Nursery where a limited number of plants are displayed for immediate purchase. Coenosium Gardens will only sell plants that are up to three years old.

Coenosium Gardens allows me to sell a limited number of new plants before I am able to offer them on a wholesale basis through Mitsch Nursery. Releasing a few plants into collections has created interest in those plants. It has also given the

nursery a good reputation as a place where special plants can be obtained. Both wholesale and retail customers are able to purchase a propagation of almost any plant seen in the gardens during a visit. It is an advantage for us to be able to satisfy customer desires in this manner.

Mitsch Nursery is a unique nursery producing many unique plants. Marketing unknown plants has proven to be a challenge, a challenge that we have met with a combination of proven methods and new methods that we have developed in our own special way.