

How Greenbrier Nurseries Develops and Promotes New Plants

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“What makes Greenbrier Nurseries different from other nurseries?” is a question that we must ask ourselves at least once a year. We all, as wholesale growers, need to examine this question individually. The term wholesale grower is a dangerous term for us. We prefer to be called a wholesale marketer. Growing is unfortunately the easy part of our business. “Growing” new markets and maintaining market share is the more difficult part.

Greenbrier Nurseries is in our 5th year of container production. Being a new player in the nursery business we realized that we definitely had to be different or no buyer would have reason to consider us as a new vendor.

We grow for two very different markets. The first is for 1-qt and 1-gal rare and unusual trees, shrubs, conifers, and perennials. These plants are sold mainly to larger nurseries for shifting and lining out and for mailorder retail nurseries for catalog sales. Our second market area is in specialty items for upscale retail garden centers on the East Coast. These items are predominately unusual generous 4-qt perennials and hard to find flowering trees, shrubs, and dwarf conifers in a 3-gal size.

In keeping with the theme of this meeting—“New Plants: Discovery, Development, and Delivery”—bringing new plants to the market has been the key to our growth since 1989. Our nursery is a good study of what building a market based on better plant material means to the success of a “niche nursery.”

Our most important and largest product line is 30,000 1-gal Japanese maples. These maples are winter bench grafted and we propagate about 50 cultivars. Understock maple plugs are purchased from the West Coast in December in 64 count trays, returned to a cell tray, and put into a greenhouse for root forcing. The understocks are side veneer grafted and placed into humidity chambers. These grafts are ready for potting by mid May. Lighting is used to extend the photoperiod from June 21st until August 20th. Incandescent 100-watt bulbs are placed 12 to 18 inches from the crops and are timed to come on for 5 min every 30 min. They come on a 9:00 PM and go through the last cycle at dawn. We also use a very strict spray program to keep *Botrytis* and other fungal problems out of the trees. At bud break the trees are sprayed with Agrimycin at the suggested label rate. Truban is also used as a soil drench twice a year to control root rot. At leaf drop in the fall the plants are sprayed with KOCIDE to clean up any problems that may be caused by decaying organic matter. A few of the cultivars that we are most excited about from a growing standpoint and from a retail perspective are Red Dragon, Shigitatsu Sawa, Osakasuki, and Tsuma Gaki.

Since, we grow so many plants in 1-gal containers, we can very quickly change with evolving market trends. One particular group of plants that has had a new resurgence of popularity is the hydrangea. Our 1993 production totals on hydrangeas was about 500 units. This year our 1995 saleable totals will top 50,000. This group of plants has great growth potential but, as is true for all plants, needs to have

better point-of-purchase material, such as tags, posters, and description cards. We are currently working with several companies in an attempt to produce these materials. Some of our best selling cultivars include *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Blue Wave', *H. serrata* 'Pink Beauty', and *H. paniculata* 'Tardiva'. Unrivaled interest has come from a dwarf oakleaf hydrangea called *H. quercifolia* 'Sikes Dwarf'.

Some of our other top selling plants produced for the 1-gal market are *Stewartia pseudocamellia* (a wonderful new cultivar from Polly Hill is 'Milk and Honey'), *Aesculus parviflora*, *Hamamelis xintermedia* cultivars, *Ilex verticillata* 'Nana' [syn. 'Red Sprite'], and a fantastic new item for 1995 is *Euonymus alatus* 'Rudy Haag'.

Our 1-gal market is supplemented by a 1-qt, dwarf-conifer program. We are currently producing in excess of 40,000 units of unique and useful *Chamaecyparis*, *Picea*, and *Tsuga*. These plants predominately go to wholesale growers for shifting but we have also found a good market for these in bonsai growers and retailers. An interesting product note is that we recently switched to a taller square pot from the traditional round quart pot and increased our production area by about 20%. This allows us to produce more plants per square foot and therefore more dollars per square foot.

Turnover is the key to profitability in our business. We have geared our production to help our profitability by virtually growing most of our plants in a year or less. If necessary we seek out the proper liner to produce that plant within this 1-year time frame. As in any nursery space is at a premium so we make every attempt to use it wisely.

Our most interesting and challenging market is the East Coast retail garden center. For this market we grow and evaluate over 300 new cultivars of trees, shrubs, vines, and perennials to come up with 20 to 30 new retail offerings for our customers. We experiment with many new cultivars with our own retail customers at our garden center before growing large product numbers for the trade.

Among the items we grow for the retail market are: *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Edith Bogue', an exceptionally hardy southern magnolia that we are successful with in our Zone 5; *M. virginiana* 'Henry Hicks' a floriferous, fragrant, evergreen sweetbay; the new *Camellia oleifera* hybrids and the diverse *Cercis* cultivars, such as 'Forest Pansy', 'Flame', and 'Silver Cloud'. Numerous hydrangeas, winter-blooming witchhazels on trellises, and two very important new barberries, *Berberis thunbergii* 'Helmond Pillar' and 'Bagatelle' round out the list. By selecting improved cultivars we have also cut production costs. Two products that exemplify this are the 'Bagatelle' barberry and 'Jean's Dilly' dwarf Alberta spruce. Unlike the more commonly grown 'Atropurpurea Nana' [syn. 'Crimson Pygmy'] barberry and *Picea glauca* var. *albertiana* 'Conica' which both require multiple pruning to produce that perfect plant for the retail market, these two new cultivars are never touched after potting. Another plant where production costs have been greatly reduced is *Corylus avellana* 'Contorta' produced on its own root. This eliminates the unattractive and very labor intensive sucker removal that grafted plants require. Not only do we have a more cost-effective plant but we are also giving the average homeowner or avid plant lover wonderful plants that they will be more successful with.

One of industry's strongest trends currently is that color sells—all year! Perennial color items must meet similar criteria to new woody plants. Our customer look to us for new plants period—whether they are woody or herbaceous. Their

expectations are high so we find ourselves evaluating more and more plants every year, One key contact we have made is with Dan Heims from the West Coast.

His breeding work has brought us such great new plants as *Corydalis* 'Blue Panda', *Heuchera micrantha* 'Pewter Veil', and *Pulmonaria* 'Excalibur'. Other new perennial items we are excited to offer are *Brunnera* 'Hadspen Cream' and *Phlox paniculata* 'Norah Leigh'. One difficulty we do have is that we really love plants and the differences between the large number of cultivars in the genus *Heuchera* can sometimes yield a real dilemma. What we try to do is pick a few really exceptional plants that are very different that a retail customer can appreciate. I can tell you that most retail customers look for something that is: unique, easy to care for, of a good perceived value, and named with a name that they can pronounce.

From a marketing standpoint these color items are of great value to us. Many large garden centers have separate buyers for woody and herbaceous plants so we have an opportunity to make two sales with each sales call. In the summer, previously a slow time, we now have the ability to run deliveries continuously. With two buyers our convenient low minimums are easy to meet.

Greenbrier Nurseries has been successful in bringing to our customers new plants and marketing assistance so that they in turn will be successful. Developing and bringing new plants to the market is vital to our success and hopefully to yours.