Texas Superstars™, the Plant Introduction and Marketing Assistance Program in Texas©

Wayne A. Mackay, Cynthia McKenney, Steve W. George, and Tim D. Davis
Texas A&M University, 17360 Coit Rd., Dallas, Texas 75252-6599

Michael A. Arnold and R. Daniel Lineberger
Texas A&M University, Department of Horticulture, Mailstop 2133, College Station, Texas 77843-2133

Jerry M. Parsons
Texas A&M University, 3355 Cherry Ridge, Ste 212, San Antonio, Texas 78230

Larry A. Stein
Texas A&M University, P.O. Box 1849, Uvalde, Texas 78802

Brent Pemberton
Texas A&M University, 1710 N Hwy 3053,Overton, Texas 75684
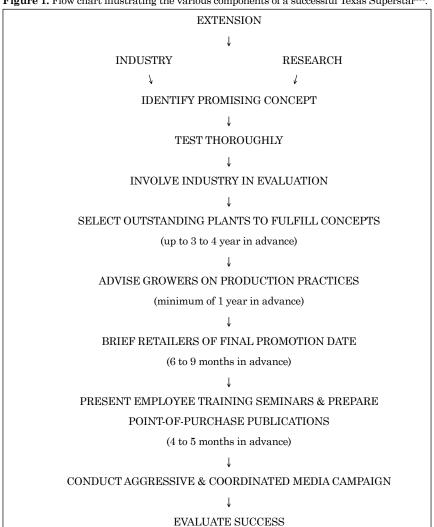
Greg G. Grant
Mercer Arboretum, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd., Humble, Texas 77338-1071

The Texas Superstar program identifies outstanding landscape plants for Texas and provides support for the nursery industry, thereby making superior plants available to Texans. Funding comes directly from industry and from consumers through the sale of plant tags bearing the Texas Superstar™ logo. Additionally, the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association and Texas Department of Agriculture have conducted Texas Superstar™ publicity campaigns. An estimated $10 million in new plant sales have been generated during the first 10 years of this program. Because plants are chosen based on their performance under minimal input conditions, Texas SuperStars™ greatly reduce their impact on the urban environment.

INTRODUCTION

The Texas Superstar™ Program is conducted by horticultural scientists and extension specialists of the Texas A&M Agriculture Program. The key to this effort is in the program's coordination between extension, research and teaching personnel and members of the ornamentals industry. The Texas Superstar™ program is comprised of two boards, the Executive Board comprised solely of University personnel, including two administrative liaisons and the Industry Advisory Board with approximately 50 members from all segments of the Texas ornamentals industry. The goals of the Texas Superstar™ program are: (1) to ensure that consumers have access to and utilize the best, most environmentally responsible plant materials and products; and (2) to help the green industry be as profitable as possible. A schematic summary of how Texas Superstar™ functions is shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1. Flow chart illustrating the various components of a successful Texas Superstar™.

```
                        EXTENSION
                            ↓
        INDUSTRY                      RESEARCH
            ↘                           ↙
            IDENTIFY PROMISING CONCEPT
                        ↓
                 TEST THOROUGHLY
                        ↓
          INVOLVE INDUSTRY IN EVALUATION
                        ↓
    SELECT OUTSTANDING PLANTS TO FULFILL CONCEPTS
              (up to 3 to 4 year in advance)
                        ↓
       ADVISE GROWERS ON PRODUCTION PRACTICES
              (minimum of 1 year in advance)
                        ↓
      BRIEF RETAILERS OF FINAL PROMOTION DATE
               (6 to 9 months in advance)
                        ↓
    PRESENT EMPLOYEE TRAINING SEMINARS & PREPARE
           POINT-OF-PURCHASE PUBLICATIONS
               (4 to 5 months in advance)
                        ↓
   CONDUCT AGGRESSIVE & COORDINATED MEDIA CAMPAIGN
                        ↓
                EVALUATE SUCCESS
```

ORGANIZATION AND METHODOLOGY

The first step in this program is the identification of promising plants by university personnel and industry leaders, followed by multi-year testing of the candidate plants at locations that represent all of the diverse climatic areas (U.S.D.A. Hardiness Zones 6 to 9, U.S.D.A., 1990) in Texas. In addition to the varied climatic zones, there are dramatic differences in rainfall, evaporation rates, maximum temperatures, and soils. For example, far west Texas receives less than 10 inches (25.4 cm) of annual rainfall with over 100 inches (254 cm) of evaporation, whereas east Texas receives more than 55 inches (139.7 cm) of annual rainfall with only minimal evaporation (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). As can be expected, few plants can tolerate all of these varied growing conditions but those that consistently demonstrate superior performance in a majority of the test locations are designated Texas Superstars™.

In some cases, there are propagation or production problems that need to be resolved prior to naming a plant a Texas Superstar™ and further research is undertaken to solve these problems. An example is 'Texas Gold' columbine (*Aquilegia chrysantha* var. *hinckleyana*), a plant native to far west Texas, which exhibited erratic seed germination coupled with limited seed availability since the plant occurred in only a few very remote locations. Efforts undertaken by Texas A&M researchers and extension specialists improved germination percentage to ~90% and also provided seed to the nursery industry, allowing 'Texas Gold' columbine to be commercially produced and promoted (Davis et al., 1993). Firebush, *Hamelia patens,* is a similar example (Davis et al., 1991).

Once superior plants are identified and production problems overcome, growers are advised (3 to 4 years notice is given for woody plants) of the upcoming marketing campaign. In some cases, the Executive Board helps to produce and distribute stock plants in advance of production schedules. Retailers are notified in the fall prior to the following year's promotion. Retailers are informed of the participating growers and supplied with informational materials to advise the public on the best cultural techniques for the plant. In many cases, training seminars are also conducted to educate the retailers about plants that are new to the area.

The final step in the Texas Superstar™ program is the coordinated media campaign which encompasses newspaper, magazine, radio, and television outlets. The media packets contain information on special attributes of the plant, how to use it in the landscape, and any special cultural care it might require. Information is also available on the Aggie Horticulture web site (www.texassuperstar.com) supported by the Texas A&M Department of Horticultural Science (Lineberger et al., 2000). The site contains detailed information and photographs for each Texas Superstar™ plant.

A recent addition to the Texas Superstar™ program is the development of a trademarked Texas Superstar™ symbol and the use of the symbol on plant tags and other promotional items. A portion of the sales of these items are returned to the Texas Superstar™ program with the goal of making the program self-supporting. Consumers are encouraged to look for the Texas Superstar™ tag to ensure that they are getting well adapted plant material. Growers are also encouraged to label all past Texas Superstar™ plant selections with the Texas Superstar™ tags to help consumers identify other plants that give outstanding performance in Texas as well as maintain high sales levels of these plants.

IMPACT AND SIGNIFICANCE

To date, 32 plants have been promoted statewide. Most of the promotions have been highly successful with some selling out in a few hours. Perhaps the most popular promotion has been for the Merced tomato (*Lycopersicon* 'Merced') promotion which resulted in over 600,000 plants being sold the first weekend of the promotion. Successful campaigns with trees, shrubs, perennials, and annuals indicate that consumers are looking for all types of plants (Arnold et al., 1998). In 1999, the Texas Superstar™ group estimated that approximately $10 million in new plant sales have been generated as a result of the first 10 years of the Texas Superstar™ program. In addition to the business impact, there is an environmental impact resulting from the sales of the Texas Superstar™ plants. Because plants are chosen based on their performance under minimal input conditions, Texas SuperStars™ require minimal inputs of water and pesticides, greatly reducing their impact on the environment.

LITERATURE CITED

Arnold, M.A., W.A. Mackay, S.W. George, and **J. M. Parsons.** 1998. Texas superstar: A case study in statewide plant trials and promotion. Landscape Plant News 9(4):7-10.

Davis, T.D., S.W. George, A. Upadhyaya, and **J. Parsons.** 1991. Propagation of firebush (*Hamelia patens*) by stem cuttings. J. Environ. Hort. 9:57-61.

Davis, T.D., D. Sankhla, N. Sankhla, and **A. Upadhyaya.** 1993. Improving seed germination of *Aquilegia chrysantha* by temperature manipulation. HortScience 28: 798-799.

Lineberger, R.D., J. Parsons, and **S.W. George.** 2000. Texas superstars. April 10, 2001. <http://www.texassuperstar.com>.

Simpson, B.J. 1988. A field guide to Texas trees. Texas Monthly Press, Austin, Texas.

U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA, Southern Regional Climate Center, 2000. Comparative Climate Data for the United States. Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Available: <http://www.srcc.lsu.edu/ccd.html>.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. 1990. Miscellaneous Publication No. 1475, USDA Hardiness Zone Map, Issued January, 1990. U.S. Dept. Agric., Washington, D.C.