

## Panel discussion on branding<sup>©</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

Brands and branding influence every purchase we make in our daily lives.

Traditionally, the horticulture industry has been resistant to develop and market plant brands. Though this is slowly changing, the industry has lagged behind other consumer products when it comes to offering branded products at retail.

### BRANDED PRODUCTS

Let's look at herbs and roses as an example. At our retail store, Gateway Garden Center, we sell herbs in various sized pots from 3 in. to 1-gal containers. About 12 years ago we began selling a branded herb line called Sarah's Superb Herbs™. I was skeptical that the public would pay \$9.99 for a pot of herbs that we would otherwise sell in a black container for anywhere from \$2.99 for a 3-in. container to \$4.99–\$7.99 for a 1-gal. Actually, 1-gal herbs were very rare and seldom available. This new herb brand came in colored pots with large tags that also included a recipe. There was an associated charitable donation being made to Easter Seals as well. Much to my and my staff's surprise, this new brand flew off the shelves. We now sell these 1-gal herbs for at least \$9.99 and upward of \$12.99. They meet little consumer resistance. We always sell through the program, but better yet, we increased our profit margin on every sale made!

Likewise, we saw the same pattern with roses. There was a time when we sold roses only in black pots or bare root in peat balls. There was little marketing, and if there was, it was often centered around the numerous requirements to keep them healthy and looking good. Being highly susceptible to insect damage and disease roses required chemical sprays and fertilizers to perform well. If you wished to grow roses successfully you needed to be pretty dedicated. The selling price for these roses were as low as \$5.99 and as high as \$14.99. Retail garden center consumers today have little time for such work and dedication. Enter the Knockout® and Drift® family of rose brands that offer new genetics. Moving away from conventional garden tea roses, these roses were sold as durable long flowering shrubs. They were marketed as requiring little care, tough as nails, and ever-blooming. Garden enthusiast of all levels of expertise flocked to them. They are sold in distinctive and easily recognized containers with large tags that have associated point of purchase information. At retail garden centers they are sold for up to \$25 container<sup>-1</sup>. This increased the profit margins considerably for business that retail them. They have become the leading and most recognized plant and plant brand in the trade.

When setting out to create the American Beauties Native Plant® brand (Figure 1) I came upon a different circumstance. The brand was challenged to sell "generic" native plants in colorful branded pots with informative tags at a higher price. We also needed to collect and donate funds to the National Wildlife Federation. These circumstances presented several challenges. The primary obstacle was convincing growers this was not only possible, but profitable. The proof became evident when our customer's sales and garden center profit margins increased when compared to selling "generic" native plants in black containers that offered no point of sale materials. Fortunately, there was also a movement to promote the use of native plants nationally but little promotion or availability of these plants at retail. Consumers embraced the American Beauties Native Plant® brand because it helped solve problems in their landscapes. For garden retailers it also built upon the store within a store concept that is used by major retailers and merchandisers nationwide. The brand showcased native plants to consumers that desired them and at the same time made it easy for retail sales staff to direct customers to the "Native Plant Section" of the store. By calling

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attention to the benefits of planting native plants and highlighting their virtues sales increased for garden centers that carried the brand.



Figure 1. American Beauties Native Plant® brand.

The concept of a store within a store is foreign to garden retailers in the USA. When looking to purchase a hooded sweatshirt a few years ago I went to a Dicks Sporting Goods. I entered the store and could not find a men's section that contained hooded sweatshirts. I did find these duplicated by brand name in multiple departments. All I had to do was figure out what manufacturer or brand I preferred. The hooded sweatshirt was available in each branded department, Nike®, Adidas®, Puma®, etc. I was unable to purchase a generic one. This brings up the notion of brand loyalty and trust. How do we get consumers to identify with the brand and trust us enough to keep coming back? This is what is often lacking in retail garden centers. We might trust our local retailer, but we don't often become loyal to a plant brand. Although this is changing, there are typically not enough advertising dollars available to keep the brand prominent in the consumer's mind from year to year.

As royalty dollars from the sale of branded plant programs are allocated to advertising and promotion there will be an increase in awareness. This will influence purchasing habits and increase sales for garden retailers. Brands like Proven Winners® and Endless Summer® collections are spending the necessary resources to influence garden retailers and the gardening public.