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Putting Plants First

The most successful marketing efforts focus on plants that perform.

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A number of marketing programs have come and gone the last 10 years, but the ones that are still around are tied to specific plants that perform.

The classic example is Wave petunias and the spinoff series – Tidal Wave, Shock Wave, Double Wave and Easy Wave. If the original 'Purple Wave' didn't offer performance that was dramatically different from a traditional seed petunia, the entire marketing program would not be possible. It would not have caught on. Slapping a clever name on an ordinary plant won't work if it doesn't mean anything. You can fool the consumer once but not twice. Repeat purchases are what make brands successful and establish a following.

The same is true with Knock Out roses. Superior performance and growing ease made them a hit with consumers and landscapers. As I drive around, I never cease to be amazed at how widely used they are. They have become ubiquitous in a good way. Unlike annuals, they return and their presence just grows.

What if you want to market a collection of plants that aren't of the same genus? That becomes a little trickier but a few companies have done it well.

Although the marketing side of Proven Winners has gotten huge, the partners have never lost sight of the plants. They scour the world for innovative genetics and put them through rigorous trialing. All three partners must agree before a variety can become a Proven Winner. If they don't all agree, each partner has the option of promoting the plant as a Proven Selection. The plants that are introduced are continuously being upgraded.

When I told the Proven Winners group their **Punch Superbells** are in the running for our Industry's Choice and Reader's Choice awards, two of the growers wrote to me independently to let me know it's all about the plants. Henry Huntington of Pleasant View Gardens said, "While Proven Winners may be a great marketing company, our roots are still in our genetics and the performance for our customers. It is our goal to continue to pick great, mind-blowing varieties to offer our customers great success in the garden."

John Rader of EuroAmerican Propagators, a true plantsman who started the brand, said, "Thanks for appreciating and recognizing our efforts to introduce great new plants. That's how we started and it still works today."

While most of the varieties are offered in white Proven Winner pots, special pots have been created for specific varieties, like petunia 'Pretty Much Picasso,' cleome 'Seniorita Rosalita' and leucanthemum 'Broadway Lights' in the assortment to make the extra special varieties stand out.

Making varieties stand out is the strategy that has worked for **The Home Depot's VIVA! program** developed by Florigem. Each variety has its own vividly colorful pot. Since only a dozen plants are offered in large quantities, the numbers can justify each plant having its own pot. This approach stimulates impulse purchases in a box store environment and lends itself to endcaps. Just a few of the varieties are in the store at any given time and the displays cycle from spring through summer.

Plants are selected to be visually different while offering outstanding performance. Several breeders have participated and the supporting grower network has more lead time to work out any production issues. It has been a winning program for the entire supply chain. We're pleased to recognize The Home Depot and Florigem as Marketer of the Year for the successful reinvention of the VIVA! program.

One newer brand, Hort Couture, is just starting to build its core base of proprietary genetics. What we saw at the California Spring Trials was very encouraging. While the fashion forward packaging is Hort Couture's identity, it's good to know the brand partners are looking just as hard at the plants.

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