

Grower goes on safari to find the unusual

An interview with self-proclaimed plant hunter Tim Wood

New plants are fun and keep the nursery business interesting. We'd get bored if the product mix didn't change from year to year. That's why we're thankful for folks like Tim Wood in our industry. He's the product development and marketing manager at Spring Meadow Nursery in Grand Haven, Mich.

Wood took some time out before the January trade shows to chat with NMPRO's Kevin Neal about his philosophies toward plant introductions, and how he goes about finding new ornamentals.

NMPRO: What is Spring Meadow's philosophy when it comes to introducing plants to the North American market?

TIM WOOD: Spring Meadow Nursery Inc. has a long tradition of seeking out and introducing new, and/or underused plants, such as *Sambucus*. The goal is not just to introduce new plants, but introduce plants that have commercial potential – plants that make our customers money. For most shrub species, we start by trialing all cultivars on the market so we better understand the strengths and weakness of each group. It also gives us a standard by which we can judge new plants.

NMPRO: What does it take to make it into the Spring Meadow catalog?

WOOD: To get into the catalog, a plant has to be better and have the ability to make our customers money. To be introduced under the Proven Winners ColorChoice brand, the standard is even higher. We've developed strict selection criteria and each plant is weighed against this criteria. We look for plants that:

- Root from cuttings easily.
- Are easy to grow for the grower and consumer.
- Have good container presentation.
- Have impulse appeal.
- Have multiple seasons of interest.

- Are dwarf or compact and thus require less pruning.
- Exhibit superior performance.
- Have improved pest resistance.
- Have attractive/colorful foliage.
- Bloom when customers are in the garden center.

While no plant is perfect, we select plants that exhibit the greatest number of these key characteristics. The goal is to make the grower, the retailer and consumer successful.

NMPRO: Can you list some of the successful plant discoveries you've introduced to North America? How did those come about?

WOOD: As a propagation nursery with over 2,000 customers, we've had the opportunity to introduce and popularize some really interesting plants over the years. Many of the introductions are not necessarily new, but rather new to commerce.

A couple of good examples would include *Forsythia* 'Kumson,' an unusual variegated plant we found in Korea.

Abelia mosanensis is a plant I found in Latvia. It's a spectacular plant that is hardy to (USDA Hardiness) Zone 4 if not 3, and has intensely fragrant blooms.

Some other examples include *Spiraea betulifolia* 'Tor,' *Leptodermis oblonga* and many unique forms of Japanese hydrangea.

About eight years ago, we started working directly with breeders and introducing their new plants under the ColorChoice



Photo by Mary Wallers, Image Botanica

To be introduced under the Proven Winners ColorChoice brand, standards are high. "We've developed a strict selection criteria and each plant is weighed against this criteria," Spring Meadow's Tim Wood said.

brand. There are now about 75 introductions that are sold under the Proven Winners ColorChoice brand. Each one of these plants has its own story. I'm especially proud of the plants we've introduced in this line. Many are ground-breaking plants that have changed the way people use and view shrubs, which include My Monet weigela and Black Lace sambucus.

The exciting thing is that we've just gotten started. We have some really incredible new plants on the way. For example, we'll be introducing a line of dwarf *Buddleia* in a series called Lo & Behold. These plants will totally change the way people think about butterfly bush.



Many Spring Meadow introductions, such as My Monet weigela (top) and Black Lace sambucus, are ground-breaking plants that have changed the way people use and view shrubs, Tim Wood said.

NMPRO: What about a plant that didn't work out for you? Are there one or two that you would have loved to see hit the market, but it just never happened?

WOOD: Breeders and nursery people bring us new plants on a regular basis, and

we turn down more plants than we introduce. Many are turned down right away because the plant does not have what it takes to be a commercial success. Many others are rejected after trialing.

We had a couple of really great-looking variegated *Buddleia*, but after five years of trialing we had to give up. Initially we were really excited, but in the end our customers would not have been happy if they purchased them, so we dropped them. We reject quite a few variegated plants because they lack stability or because they're just not attractive.

NMPRO: Does a nursery have to be a certain size before it can be a player in the plant-introduction game?

WOOD: We tend to find really good plants at small nurseries. Small nurseries are the perfect place to find new plants because the owner is the one working the field. They find sports and seedlings that would be culled at larger nurseries. But, it's pretty difficult for a small grower or breeder to properly introduce a new variety. The patent books are filled with unsuccessful plants that no one has ever heard of and never will.

Our business has some unique characteristics that greatly improve our chances of success. As a propagation nursery with customers across North America and Canada, we have a ready customer base that looks to us for new plants. Liners are easy to ship and relatively inexpensive to buy, and that helps speed the process along. We have the facilities, the distribution and customer base.

The process is also very expensive. The patent cost is the cheap part. The expensive part is the marketing investment required to successfully launch a new plant. Most small growers don't have the money, distribution

system or customer base to do a good plant launch. It can be done, but often success comes after the patent has expired.

NMPRO: Where are your favorite plant-hunting grounds?

WOOD: I'll go anywhere necessary. My favorite places are places I've never been before, because I love exploring cultures, food and the plants. My only limitations are that the climate is similar to Michigan's and that the country has enough discretionary income to garden. If the income is not there, people are more interested in growing food than ornamentals.

NMPRO: When you're searching in foreign lands for potential introductions, what criteria do you look for?

WOOD: We use the same criteria I listed earlier, but added to the list is it must not be prohibited from importation.

Typically, when traveling abroad I am not looking for plants. I know that sounds



Spring Meadow will be introducing a line of dwarf *Buddleia* in a series called Lo & Behold. "These plants will totally change the way people think about butterfly bush," Tim Wood said.

Tim Wood, in his own words

We thought about writing a generic piece on Tim Wood's background in the nursery industry. But then we stumbled across his "About me" essay on his blog, The Modern Day Plant Hunter (<http://plant-quest.blogspot.com>). It's a lot more fun to read.

I have this really tough job. I travel the world looking for new plants, meeting fun people and sampling the food, beer and wine. Someone has to do it.

How did I get this gig? Lots of training and a bit of luck. I'm a third-generation plantsman who started working at my father's nursery at 8 years old. Tired of hard work, I set off to study at Michigan State, University of Delaware and Youngstown State.

My on-the-job training came at Longwood Gardens, Arnold Arboretum at Harvard, Chicago Botanic Garden, Mill Creek Park, Kingwood Center and Zelenka Nursery. Then, with a bit of luck, I landed a sweet job at Spring Meadow Nursery.

To beef up my résumé, I published numerous articles and photographs in nursery and gardening magazines, hosted a radio show, taught at Michigan State University and Muskegon Community College and published three books: "Tree and Shrub Gardening for Michigan," "The Best Garden Plants" and "Gardening Month by Month." You can buy 'em on Amazon.com — they're great gifts!

I am in the Royal Horticultural Society, and was named Michigan Nurseryman of the Year. I'm in the International Plant Propagators' Society, Garden Writers Association, etc, etc.

I have a passion to share my love and knowledge of plants with others. And I'm interested in being a regular host on "Oprah Winfrey Show." If you know Oprah, tell her I'm the Dr. Oz of Horticulture!

funny, but it's true. I'm searching for the people who have the potential to develop a new plant; breeders, specialty nurseries, enthusiasts and collectors. It's more about networking and developing relationships and explaining to people our process and the services we offer.

For the most part, I leave wild plant collecting to botanic gardens and specialty growers. While it's immensely fun to collect from the wild, it's not all that productive. The odds of finding a good commercial plant are much better working with breeders, nurseries and collectors in a foreign country. They know the local flora better than I can ever expect to in the short time that I have in their country.

NMPRO: How important are contacts with other breeders?

WOOD: My contacts are more important than the plants. They are my best resource when looking for new breeders. Each time we make a breeder successful, they tell their friends about Spring Meadow and it snowballs.

This business requires a lot of trust and

Photo courtesy of www.springmeadownursery.com



Pinky Winky hydrangea comes from a Belgian government facility.

results. Once you deliver results, the trust level goes up. So many of these people have been given pie-in-the-sky promises and have been burned. We work very hard on behalf of our breeders, but we are also brutally honest with them. Most breeders feel their plants are very special, but the truth is that every plant has its weaknesses. Some are obvious and others are less obvious.

NMPRO: Do you ever rely on universities or research stations for plant discoveries?

WOOD: Sure. We work with several governmental breeding programs. Pinky Winky hydrangea comes from the Belgian government, and Black Lace sambucus comes from East Malling Research Station in England.

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We also work with several university breeding programs. The Lo & Behold *Buddleia* series comes from the JC Raulston Arboretum at North Carolina State. We are also funding university breeding projects through the country.

NMPRO: What is the typical time-frame — if there is one — between discovery of a plant and its introduction to the nursery market?

WOOD: It takes a minimum of four years, but typically it takes longer. The process is faster if the breeder has tested the plant for a long period of time, has plenty of stock and the plant grows fast. But that's rare.

Normally you're looking at about five or six years if everything goes right. You have to build stock, test the plant in production and in the ground. We typically build up stock while we're evaluating a plant so it speeds up the process, but it's also risky. You have to be prepared to throw a lot of plants away if it does not live up to expectations. That's why it is very important that we stick to our selection criteria.

NMPRO: We understand that Spring Meadow will be focusing more on in-house breeding in the future. Can you tell us what's in store there?

WOOD: We have been doing some internal breeding for the last eight years. Summer Wine *Physocarpus* (introduced to the trade in 2004), Chardonnay Pearls *deutzia* (2004) and Fine Wine *weigela* (2006) were all developed in-house.

But we have intensified our breeding efforts lately. We have a very clear understanding of the shrub market and we have a wish list of plants that we want created. Hoping to find these plants in our travels is not the answer. We've made a major commitment to breeding and have about 10 acres of seedlings under evaluation. We're working on just about every species in our catalog. It's an expensive process, but we are starting to see the results.

For spring 2008 we introduced four new plants from our breeding program, including our Let's Dance line of reblooming hydrangeas. I'm very excited about this because I think that Endless Summer hydrangea is just the beginning when it comes to hydrangeas that bloom on new wood. There's so much more potential in the genus *Hydrangea*, and that's where the wish list comes in. We felt that we could improve the quality of blooms, the intensity of flower color and the foliage



This spring, Spring Meadow introduced four new plants from its breeding program, including the Let's Dance line of reblooming hydrangeas. Moonlight is at left, Starlight at right.

quality. We've accomplished all that with this breeding project. It's very exciting, but more importantly it provides our customers with a better product.

NMPRO: Are there too many new varieties being introduced to the market? Are consumers becoming overwhelmed?

WOOD: I always laugh when I hear people say that. While we might say there are too many red roses being introduced, there's always room for a better plant.

Just look at the success of Knock Out rose, and the same can be said for hydrangea, weigela and, yes, even daylilies.

Is it confusing to the consumer? I don't think so, they're the ones that benefit most. They have no idea how many red roses are introduced each year, so it's irrelevant to them. Rather, I think that it's the growers, retailers and the landscapers that tend to be overwhelmed. The market is changing very fast and these people need to understand what's coming and how to make money growing these plants. That's not always easy to do.

Part of Spring Meadow's job is to help direct growers toward the winners and to provide them with the tools they need to be successful with new plants. Professionals should consider growing the best varieties, not *all* varieties, to make consumers' decisions easier.

NMPRO: In a recent blog entry, you listed your current favorite plants of the moment. What does it take for a plant to be in your Top 10 list?

WOOD: To make my list, a plant has to be a winner for the propagator, the grower, the retailer, the landscaper and the homeowner. My goal is to change the way

people view flowering shrubs.

While people have typically viewed shrubs as the backbone of the garden, I look for shrubs that are so colorful and attractive and so useful, they'll find a home in the front of the border. I'm especially into plants with attractive foliage—flowers last only a few weeks, but foliage can look good all season long. I also like shrubs that don't require much care, for example dwarf or compact varieties.

◆ **For more:** Tim Wood, Spring Meadow Nursery Inc., (800) 633-8859; www.springmeadownursery.com

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