



growing green: **EAGLE CREEK**

Words For The Wise

Eagle Creek tested its branded line of sustainably grown plants against similar plants marketed with Proven Winners this year and the results didn't quite meet the expectations with which the operation initially set out

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Sustainability sounds good and all, but before growers and garden center owners make decisions that shift their businesses full speed into that mode of thought, the dollars and cents they commit to sustainability must make good economic sense.

That is, at least, how John Bonner, owner of Eagle Creek Wholesale in Mantua, Ohio, approaches sustainability in his business. Eagle Creek didn't commit to cardboard, plastic and water recycling or wind power for electricity overnight.

Likewise, when Eagle Creek started a line of sustainably grown plants this year and branded them Earth's Choice, Bonner didn't necessarily expect the

line to break sales records. He did, however, expect Earth's Choice plants – 4.25-inch annuals in rice hull pots – to sell better than they did, especially because similar plants were also sold in Proven Winners packaging at Eagle

Creek Garden Center in Bainbridge, Ohio.

"I was disappointed with how it sold," Bonner says. "I was hoping people would respond better than they did. People aren't going to just buy plants because they're sustainably grown. The Proven Winners branded plants were far too appetizing."

The Planning Stage

Eagle Creek Garden Center didn't quite commit

the amount of space to Earth's Choice plants as it did Proven Winners and other major plant lines, but it did start the new line out in the store's main aisle at the start of spring. What better location is there, after all, to showcase a new and unfamiliar plant line like Earth's Choice?

Customer traffic was, of course, heaviest there, but most customers simply walked by the Earth's Choice display and continued their search for more established brands like Proven Winners.

"We did Earth's Choice very small," Bonner says. "We didn't put a whole lot of money or time into it. I don't know how much more marketing effort we'll put into it at this point, because it wasn't like people were seeking out a sustainably grown plant – even though Proven Winners were grown at the same place."

The kicker, though, is that customers who were approached at the garden center and told that Earth's Choice products were similar to Proven Winners' were more willing to buy Earth's Choice. So, sustainably grown plants got the edge in conversations, but based on signage and space dedicated to the display, Earth's Choice struggled to get off the ground.

Bonner's sister, owner Jill Cain, who operates the garden center, dedicated 25 percent of the annuals space in the retail operation to Earth's Choice, which includes about 20 different varieties and is also sold to retailers throughout the wholesale program. Eagle Creek tried to increase the program's reach that way, as well.

"Just about everywhere we implemented this





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product, we didn't give it a whole lot of space," Bonner says. "Part of the problem is that we have our own retail place. Square footage in a garden center can make or break your sales, if you're not dedicating space to the product."

To date, the Proven Winners plants have sold about 22 times better than the sustainably grown Earth's Choice plants at Eagle Creek. Eagle Creek made the benefits of Earth's Choice known – like Proven Winners – through point-of-purchase materials, which included bench tape, poster signage and specially created tags. Those materials all included the colorful and unique Earth's Choice logo.

Lessons Learned

Still, the Earth's Choice line was new to

Eagle Creek customers. And looking back, there are a couple of obvious things Bonner might do differently if he were to consider another branded line of sustainably grown plants in the future.

"I think we could have done a better job of branding it and marketing it if we put money out there," he says. "I think it's a new thing, it's growing on people and it's growing on the marketplace."

"This was a good experience. I think it gave us a good gauge as to where consumers are really at. Are they really looking for sustainably grown plants, or will they go the other way if they have another choice?"

- John Bonner, Eagle Creek owner



If anything, the Earth's Choice line gave Bonner another outlook on sustainability. It also gave him another outlook on branding, which Eagle Creek tried a couple of years ago with the Eagle Creek name.

"This was a good experience," Bonner says. "I think it gave us a good gauge as to where consumers are really at. Are they really looking for sustainably grown plants, or will they go the other way if they have another choice?"

"There's a whole other way you can evaluate it, too: Maybe customers are looking for environmentally friendly products, but maybe the weight of the Proven Winners plant brand overshadows that. Maybe Proven Winners wasn't the best one to compare [Earth's Choice] to."

Or, maybe the key to a successful line of sustainably grown plants is consumer awareness of companies that practice sustainability in business.

"I think it's really important that we have a sustainably run business," Bonner says. "Then, I think you can go to the public and promote your operation with a line of sustainably grown plants. Gaining the respect of the public goes a long way." •

