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# Landscape MANAGEMENT

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## Partners in color

Discounts, timely delivery and better selections  
unite landscapers, breeders and growers

# PARTNERS

## Discounts, timely delivery and better selections unite

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**IT WOULDN'T BE SURPRISING** if landscape contractors felt a little like the pretty girl before the school dance.

The professional landscape market is one of the fastest-growing segments of the color market. That fact has not gone unnoticed by breeders and growers, who are courting potential Green Industry partners like never before.

In the past few years, breeders and growers have increased their focus on professional landscapers, providing a barrage of marketing materials, information and events designed to increase awareness of their offerings. Big box retailers average 2% to 3% annual growth in ornamentals while the landscape segment offers 8% to 12% annual color growth, says Ball Horticulture's Jeff Gibson. Landscapers get new flowers and promises of discounts, just-in-time delivery and increased varieties, plant versatility and availability. It's little wonder that landscapers' dance cards are filling up fast with potential color partners.

### Luring landscapers

As the object of desire, landscapers are in a unique position to take advantage of new opportunities. It might be an invitation to visit a seed propagator's trial site to learn about the latest variety.

"It's all about being on the cutting edge," says Bruce Hellerick, senior horticultural specialist for the Brickman Group. Becoming more educated on new color varieties gives landscapers upfront knowledge of innovative plants that are more disease- and insect-resistant, drought tolerant and/or require less pruning. It also exposes landscapers to a palette of new



PHOTO BY: MARTY WHITFORD



# IN color

landscapers, breeders and growers



## BUSINESS


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shades and shapes to improve their landscape designs and bottom lines.

Having knowledge of the latest colors is key but having access to the new plants precisely where and when you need them is equally attractive. Many growers now are willing to deliver product directly to landscapers' job sites on the days they need them. Jack Barnwell's close relationship with Proven Winners helps him customize orders to fill his needs.

"I can get hundreds of hanging baskets and large amounts of material, specifically grown for me," says the owner of Barnwell Landscape and Garden Services, Mackinac Island, MI. "I can design all my own hanging baskets and planters and really customize what I want for these different jobs — and have it all grown specific to each job."

A healthy relationship with growers



We're going to help improve their businesses and ours.

— JEFF GIBSON, landscape business manager, Ball Horticulture



and breeders creates other opportunities. Landscapers whose long-term contracts with clients enable them to place orders that match a grower's schedule can expect more variety, healthier plants grown to their specification and, perhaps, discounts of 10% or more on their advance purchases.

### Growers, breeders benefit too

Oddly enough, considering how closely tied their businesses are, professional landscapers and the growers and breeders understand very little about one another.



Jack Barnwell designs color for many hotels on Mackinac Island.

"People are surprised when you explain to them how big the landscape industry really is," says Polly Bailey-Rule, CLP, landscape account manager for Four Star Greenhouse, one of the three entities comprising the Proven Winners brand. "Most people's perception is the industry is made up of two guys in a pickup truck. It's the same on the landscape side, looking at the greenhouse end of things."

"Partnering in colors is going to open all our eyes to just how

big we are and how much more we can do together by understanding what the other guys are doing and why they're doing it," Bailey-Rule notes.

One goal, says Gibson, landscape business manager for Ball, is to get the two sides to come to a meeting of the minds.

"If we can help both parties better understand the (other's) issues, in the long run, we're going to help improve their businesses, and ours in the process," Gibson says. "We have a vast array of plant material for use. The palette could be considerably expanded."

The challenge, Gibson adds, is educating landscapers that a plethora of new color options exist and it's well worth their efforts to look into them and into partnering closer with growers and breeders. Like the contractors they're trying to reach, there is another driver pushing growers to increase their contact with contractors. Consumers are spending less on color, and growers face increasing competition for those dollars from big box retailers.

"The garden centers are having a tough time of it," Hellerick notes. "The industry went, 'Aha, there's this whole group of landscape people out there who buy thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of flats of flowers a year. We've not even tapped into that.'"

Breeders face their own challenges.

"The seed industry is shrinking," says Jessica DeGraaf, product support specialist for Benary. "We're fighting for somebody else's piece of the pie. When you start looking at a lot of the growers we're selling to, they're realizing the contractor market is huge and the potential is huge."

For those reasons, breeders and greenhouse owners are working together to educate contractors about everything from the new varieties to how to develop their own color offerings.

"We're focusing on helping our landscape companies become successful using higher-quality varieties that might get

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passed by for the off-the-shelf, standard same old thing," says Steve Zylstra, owner of Zylstra Greenhouses, Kalamazoo, MI.

And it's been a learning experience for all involved.

"It's a tough market to nail down," says Jonathan Bardzik, director of marketing for the American Nursery & Landscape Association (ANLA). "These folks are all different sizes. They have different structures. It's unclear on how to get to those (contractors) to promote new introductions, which is pretty much what (breeders and growers) are trying to do."

### **A blossoming model**

Traditionally, breeders sell to the thousands of growers around the country. While that number is daunting, it is nothing compared with the tens of thousands of landscape contractor companies. Deciding how to reach them poses a host of new challenges.

Not surprisingly, breeders and growers are targeting the biggest players first. They're using the methods you might expect — catalogs, direct-mail marketing, newsletters and Web sites — but they're also reaching out in new ways.

Goldsmith Seeds has chosen the direct approach, bringing growers and key

customers to its Landscape Week, which is filled with educational sessions, a review of new and future releases, and recreational activities including some golf and a little fine dining. The most-recent event included seminars on designing beds, colorscaping under drought conditions, the symbolism of color, and insects and disease problems. One of the most valuable presentations is the viewing of future color.

"We had a presentation on new varieties," says Dean Bemis, account manager for Gilroy, CA-based Goldsmith. "Every year we have anywhere from 10 to 50 new introductions."

About 30 landscape contractors and growers attend the annual event (launched in 2007) to absorb information and return to their operations filled with ideas on improving sales and service through new colors.

"I (presented) a report for our account managers to show them some of the new things that are coming down the pike, some of the things just released to give them some ideas on color combinations," says Linda Horn, director of marketing for Total Environment Inc., Edmond, OK. "It was really beneficial for me to go see the trials. It gives you a much broader



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— POLLY BAILEY-RULE,  
landscape account manager,  
Four Star Greenhouse



scope of what's out there to use."

Four Star hired Bailey-Rule to fill a newly created position that would target the landscape contractor segment.

"I'm doing an incredible amount of marketing, building relationships between Four Star/myself and the landscape industry," she says. "We have joined local landscape associations, are participating in the trade shows and will be hosting the Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association's field day next summer. We've also had a Landscape Day in our gardens."

Four Star isn't just bringing growers and contractors together. In some cases, the firm is reaching out to the contractors directly. Bailey-Rule is working with Barnwell Landscape and Garden Services on Mackinac Island in Michigan to supply plants.

"This is the first time that Four Star will be selling directly to the professionals putting the plants into the ground," Bailey-Rule says. "Their needs are different than growing liners and selling them

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to wholesale growers.”

For Barnwell, the new approach holds huge benefits.

“Being able to communicate with my growers, and to customize size and plant developments before they come up here is ideal, so I can make sure certain gardens are peaking and looking exactly the way I want them to, when I want them to,” says Barnwell, who is responsible for many of the properties at the summer resort community.

Benary also is working with growers to help them reach the professional landscaper market.

“We do a large sampling program — that was new this year,” says DeGraaf. “We focus on two or three key items, and we make sure all of our key growers are sending it to their landscape contractor customers.”

With some 30 trial sites around the U.S., the company hopes to invite contractors around the country to see what’s new and available in their markets. The company also plans to have a Benary sales representative talk directly with interested landscapers.

### **Why it works**

No matter how well wine and dined they are, landscapers aren’t going to take a week out of their busy schedules if there is no benefit. Having the opportunity to talk with non-competing peers is another color partnering incentive.

“A lot of folks talked about different problems that they had in the field,” says Total Environment’s Horn. “Others shared how they solved them. It was beneficial. I never felt threatened from someone stealing our ideas.”

Goldsmith has 30 acres of color growing at its Gilroy, CA, facility. Part of it is used to present row-by-row comparisons of Goldsmith varieties next to

competitors.

“I call it, ‘The good, the bad and the ugly.’” Bemis teases. “Sometimes we look great; sometimes just OK, and sometimes we just don’t measure up. The real competition for business is not in the relationships we have with our competitors and our customers — it’s in the varieties. If the varieties are good, they will sell, and they’ll be successful.”

Goldsmith has conducted two Landscape Weeks, the most recent in July. It has committed to at least three more through 2011.

“That way, we hope to have in our basket of landscape market contacts around 150 to 250 individuals and companies we can call on a first-name basis,” Bemis says. “We depend on one thing over everything else: In our industry, it’s a relationship business. If you have a good relationship with the management of large landscape companies, when you have something good, they’re more than happy to give (a new variety) a try.”

### **Mutual benefit**

For these programs to work long-term, there must be mutual benefit. Breeders and growers hope to expand their businesses; landscapers get access to new varieties and discounts on advance purchases. But it goes beyond the money.

“We realized these people learn more from one another than they will from us,” he continues. “If we provide a great forum for that exchange of ideas, they’ll go back and say great things about the week — as well as remember our varieties and what they’ll do and won’t do.”

Developing better relationships also can improve other areas of the business. Now, when contractors place orders, the plants often are delivered to their companies’ yards, where they might sit



**Crew members from Acres Group install some color from Ball Horticulture.**

for several days. With growing color relationships, that is beginning to change.

“More large commercial growers are organizing the plant material according to how the landscaper would like it delivered to each jobsite,” Ball’s Gibson says. “The amount of time from the greenhouse grower’s door to the professional landscaper’s jobsite might be a matter of hours.”

### **The takeaway**

While breeders and growers are focusing their attention on the larger players, that doesn’t mean smaller contractors can’t get in on the action.

“Visit every one of your garden centers within 20 miles to see what’s new,” Hellerick offers. “And if there is something new that you’ve never seen, buy a couple plants and install them. Find a client who likes to be on the cutting edge, and trial them there.”

Small or large, contractors can expect to hear more from breeders and growers.

“Our future is dependent on making sure landscape professionals are knowledgeable about our products and see and harvest the blossoming opportunities in the color market,” Gibson concludes. “That’s why we are chasing after this segment — together.” **LM**