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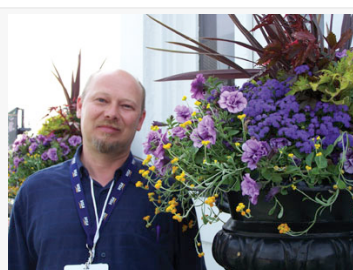
Dressing Up The Derby

High-profile attractions are perfect places to showcase beautiful plantings. What does Churchill Downs plant? Proven Winners.

July 2008

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Proven Winners brought beauty to Churchill Downs this spring as an official sponsor of the Kentucky Derby and Kentucky Oaks horse races in Louisville, Ky. Greenhouse Grower's editor and America In Bloom board member Delilah Onofrey and garden celebrity P. Allen Smith got a behind-the-scenes VIP tour. Their hosts were Sharon Gravitt of EuroAmerican Propagators in Bonsall, Calif., and John Backert, director of horticulture at Churchill Downs.



From classy combos to drifts of color Horticulture Director John Backert has Churchill Downs covered.

Backert already was a customer of Proven Winners, buying liners from EuroAmerican for Churchill Downs and years before, when he and his wife ran a small growing operation. For the spring kickoff, he grows 30,000 plants to decorate the grounds. A few years ago, he and Gravitt discussed taking EuroAmerican's and Proven Winners' participation to the next level as an event sponsor.

This was the third year Proven Winners had been an official sponsor of the races. In addition to purchasing prominent ads in the official programs for the races, EuroAmerican supplied plants for more than 130 mixed containers in the Marquis Village, where corporate sponsors entertain guests in hospitality suite tents.

The Kentucky Derby is one of the largest sports spectacles, drawing more than 155,000 people to the event itself from all walks of life and a wide economic spectrum. It's one of the biggest parties in America, with mint juleps being the drink of choice.

Prepared For Plantings

Backert always makes sure he has benches full of fresh plant material ready to go, just in case any of the beds need to be replaced. In spring, he needs to be prepared for frosts, unseasonably hot conditions, winds and heavy rains.

On the infield and in beds around the scoreboard, thousands of Supertunias were planted in Royal Magenta, Blushing Princess, Vista Bubblegum and Mini Purple. 'Supertunia Blushing Princess' also was planted in the special Aristides garden honoring the very first winning Kentucky Derby horse in 1875.

Other varieties selected for plantings include: euphorbia 'Diamond Frost'; coleuses 'Glennis,' 'Pink Chaos' and 'Lemon Sensation'; lantana 'Tropical Temptation'; osteospermums 'Orange Symphony' and 'Soprano Lilac Spoon'; salvias 'Sparkler Red' and 'Sparkler Purple'; scaevola 'Whirlwind Blue'; and Supertunias Mini Rose Veined, Mini Appleblossom and Vista Fuchsia.

As director of horticulture at Churchill Downs, Backert has a lot of ground to cover with just eight to 10 full-time employees. In addition to maintaining plantings for the 140-acre property, the greenhouse has its own floral department that handles cut flower arrangements throughout the events, including the beautiful blanket of Stargazer lilies he lays on the winning horse of the Kentucky Oaks race and roses on the Kentucky Derby winner.

Churchill Downs also has quite a collection of historic urns that are perfect for combination plantings. Floral finery is a big part of these prestigious races.

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