



Connie's Corner

Perusing the Plant Plethora by Connie Kratzke

Every year, one of my most challenging tasks is ordering perennial stock. What makes it difficult are future uncertainties. At my former job, what I ordered was based on what our parent company installed on commercial projects. While that list would fluctuate inexplicably to an extent, there was at least some rhyme and reason to it. Determining what to order here is more challenging because we are working with numerous installers and retailers. When I look back at our sales numbers for a particular item over a three year period, figures can be misleading. One company's major project can skew our averages. We want to have high enough quantities of staple plants to bid large projects competitively. That said, space is our most precious commodity. Contributing to the challenge is demand for the newest, shiniest stuff. We can't just grow Karl Foerster and Stella D'Oro and call it a day.

For our initial planting, I must consider the constraints of our covered spaces. About 36,500 plants fit in our five greenhouses. That sounds like plenty, doesn't it? Think again. By mid-May, we're planting the next generation. This year, I broke our late order in half; waiting until late June to receive our final shipment. My intention was to get all plugs planted before receiving more. I did not succeed. Once we factor in trees and shrubs that need to be planted in containers and fields, the best laid plans fall victim to realities.

My dream is to assign sales-based real estate to all plants. Each genus will have a footprint and we will order within the confines of those boundaries. Space allotted will be based on each plant's ability to pay the rent. Obviously, we will need to periodically adjust our lots. Production areas will be created for perennials, shrubs and trees. Once a group is deemed ready for sale, it will move to its rental unit. There is nothing revolutionary about this idea. Growth necessitates new efficiencies. As demand increases, so does the need for space. Every plant on the

property needs to earn its keep. Sometimes the quietest tenants must be evicted.

Factoring in all of these considerations, (and so many more that I don't have the energy to blaviate about) it's hard to get psyched up about new plants. Don't get me wrong, I love flipping through catalogs and visiting trial gardens. However, for every choice made I must ask, "what will this plant do for us?" That can put me on a tangent with a dead end. When considering adding a new Sedum, I must ask what makes it superior to its peers. Which less enticing variety could be dropped to create space for my gamble? Will there be hardiness issues? Will colorful foliage compromise vigor? How good will it look on a garden bench in May? Will it survive or flourish under dry conditions? Are designers even using Sedums anymore?

At this point, you might wonder about my mental state. I assure you, I'm fine (at least by my relatively low standards.) Explaining the process allows me to emphasize the care involved in selecting varieties. For every new cultivar, I've interrogated myself extensively. The verdict is still out on some of the additions I made last year, many of which I am trialing at home. Mukgenias seem to take time to establish. For a moment, that led me to question their choice. Then I remembered my Mukdenias were the same way. With any luck, I will be pleasantly surprised.

This year, I'm quite enthused by our additions. To keep things simple, I'll just list them. I am trying to be very proper with the names used here, so I don't have to fill the body of my column with abbreviations and numbers.

Aruncus 'Sparkles' Athyrium 'Aubergine Lady' ppaf

Bergenia 'Happily Ever After' ppaf (on wait list for '26 Delphinium 'Magic Fountains White/Dark Bee'

Heliopsis 'Bleeding Hearts' Iris 'Neptune's Wine'

Monarda 'Bee-Mine™ Red' pp33917 Nepeta 'Chartreuse on the Loose' ppaf

Panicum 'Heavy Metal' Phlox subulata 'Violet Pinwheels' pp25884

Pycnanthemum 'Smokey Mountain Mint' ppaf Schizachyrium 'Smoke Signal' pp27433

Tricyrtis 'Autumn Glow'

In case you missed them, last year's additions were...

Aster 'Snow Flurry' Aster 'Lady in Black'

Baptisia 'Twilite PrairieBlues™' pp19011 Carex rosea

Dicentra 'King of Hearts' Eryngium yuccifolium 'Prairie Moon'

Filipendula x 'Red Umbrellas' pp23129 Geum 'Alabama Slammer'

Geum 'Mai Tai' Iris germanica 'Firebreather'

Lamium 'Purple Dragon' Lilium 'Tiger Babies'

Lupinus 'Gallery Mix' Monarda punctata

Mukdenia rossii 'Karasuba' Mukgenia 'Nova Flame'

Nepeta x 'Neptune' Penstemon 'Pikes Peak Purple'

Physostegia 'Pink Manners' Polemonium 'Bressingham Purple'

Salvia 'Snow Hill' Sanguisorba 'Plum Drops'

Sorghastrum 'Golden Sunset' pp33776 Vernonia 'Summer Surrender'

Waldsteinia ternata

Last year was the first time I ordered perennial stock for Wilson's. I started out behind the 8-ball in February. Consequently, quite a few of the additions I made were close substitutes for varieties I was unable to source. Both Asters are plants I am super psyched about, but our shipment was damaged and that delayed their availability. We'll have great looking crops of both next spring. Out of all the exciting stuff on last year's list, I must honestly say that the Carex roseas have impressed me most. They look fantastic beneath the dense canopy of our largest Sugar Maple, despite many rainless weeks. Sometimes performance trumps flashiness.

This year, it was harder to make my cut. Spatial challenges force me to be conservative while attempting to stay relevant. 'Sparkles' Aruncus is joining us because I have yet to find an Aruncus that isn't great in the ground. 'Aubergine Lady' fern is a purple fern. That's all it needs to be. Bergenia 'Happy Ever After' is a white-flowering Bergenia. 'Winter Glow' Bergenia is on the chopping block, simply because we don't need both it and 'Red Beauty' 'Red Beauty' is finishing faster than its predecessor and that's what we need for our pre-order clients. The Delphinium I added is simply a sub for 'Guardian White', which our primary supplier has dropped. 'Bleeding Hearts' Heliopsis is another plant I have chosen for its landscape performance. 'Burning Hearts' performs admirably and I believe its orange-flowering counterpart will too. 'Neptune's Wine' is a uniquely-colored Iris. Every now and again I like to throw one of those in the mix. 'Bee-Mine™ Red' Monarda is compact and mildew-resistant. As usual, we'll see! 'Chartreuse on the Loose' Nepeta has a tight habit and golden foliage. That's a no-fail combination. 'Heavy Metal' Panicum isn't new at all. We're adding it because we probably should have a while ago. 'Violet Pinwheels' Creeping Phlox appears to be much more vibrant than 'Emerald Blue'. 'Smokey Mountain Mint' Pycnanthemum is a bit of a gamble, but we have loyal clients who really embrace native cultivars and that's a cause I can get behind. 'Smoke Signal' Little Bluestem was chosen (along with 'Bleeding Hearts') to help me hit a minimum for a quantity discount. That damning evidence revealed, it was on a very short list of potential candidates. I have been quite pleased with 'Blackhawks' and 'Dancing Wind' Big Bluestem and I think 'Golden Sunset' Indian Grass will be another winner. The potential I am seeing in cultivated native grasses is endless. That market has absolutely exploded since I entered the industry. When you find a grass with an erect habit and unique color, there's no harm in giving it a whirl. 'Autumn Glow' Toad Lily just makes sense to me. I have been very impressed with the beating my Tricyrtis takes each year. Dwelling beneath an extremely content Eupatorium is no easy task. The two co-exist without issue, despite Joe's greediness.

The preceding, ginormous paragraph is such a gross, oversimplification of how I made these selections that I'm tempted to hit backspace. Still, I feel it necessary to make brief comments on each plant. My hope is you will consider trying some of these cultivars to validate my process. Perhaps I have hit on some things you like or are interested in experimenting with. Negative comments are welcome, too. No one wins if forever homes aren't found.

Former staples like 'Elijah Blue' Fescue and 'Jack Frost' Brunnera will likely be phased out because better performers have made themselves known. 'Beyond Blue' and 'Cool as Ice' put Elijah to shame. 'Silver Heart' Brunnera seems to overwinter significantly better than 'Jack'. Our industry is constantly evolving in every fathomable way. Technology is advancing at alarming rates. New plants are entering the market by the dozens. When you find yourself stuck in the status quo, you are vulnerable to being left behind. Wondering why we've dropped a plant? Please ask! Chances are we've found a new tenant that really earns its keep.

Images courtesy of Growing Colors™ and Walter's Gardens, Inc.

Top: 'Sparkles' Aruncus & 'Aubergine Lady' Athyrium

Lower: 'Chartreuse on the Loose' Nepeta and 'Smoke Signal' Schizachyrium pp27433



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