

Nothing Very New: The Perpetuation of Successful Plants for the South[®]

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INTRODUCTION

The horticulture industry and gardening are a lot like the fashion industry. Both always have to come up with a new trend, present something different, or make an imaginative statement to excite and keep the public's interest. However, when it comes down to it, landscapers and the average gardener want plants that can stand up to a certain degree of neglect, can survive inexperienced and unknowledgeable maintenance crews, and still have the ability to provide a "WOW factor" with an expected and understood degree of longevity and dependability.

In fashion, when a lady requires a perfect look for an important event, she will pull out a classic black dress and her best string of cultured pearls. A gentleman will don a well-tailored suit, a perfectly starched shirt, a silk tie — and stylishly arrive in a Lincoln Town Car or silver Mercedes.

For success in horticulture, you are always going to depend on and select from your palette of plants that are "tried-and-true" and have stood the test of time, using the new introduction as an occasional accessory to the total look.

BEFORE PERENNIALS WERE COOL

There was a time when perennials were not in the mainstream of horticultural marketing and production. There was a time when everything that was a perennial was new, unfamiliar, and virtually unavailable. I know. I was there!

In 1977, when my late partner Marc Richardson and I started Goodness Grows, there were very few reliable sources for perennial plants or seed throughout the country and even less information on propagation, cultivation, and their performance in the South. Many of our earliest offerings were obtained from other gardeners who eagerly shared their plants, and thankfully their knowledge of how to grow and propagate them.

I remember calling the American Peony Society in those early years to get their recommendations on which peony cultivars would be best for the South. The woman on the phone said in her stately tone, "Peonies do not do well in the South..." I thanked her for her time and expertise and told her she was probably right and that it must have been "pee-OH-neeZ" in grandmother's backyard and not peonies.

Marc and I decided to plant trial gardens in order to observe, learn, and educate ourselves and others about what to expect of a plant's performance after so many years in the landscape. It was also imperative for us to maintain stock plants for divisions, cuttings, and seed in order to ensure our ability to perpetuate our offerings.

CHANGES IN THE PERENNIAL MARKET

What a difference 30-plus years have made in the horticulture industry! The availability of plant material and the knowledge of the average consumer, grow-

ers, garden center operators, educators, and industry leaders are greater now than ever before. Thirty-something years ago, every aspect of the perennial market was wide open, and it was exciting to be a pioneer and experience the wonder and fascination of a newly emerging trend offering a variety of plants to a virginal marketplace and to an industry yearning for something different and interesting. The search for new plants continues to this day. New cultivars are continually being introduced, the result of careful breeding and selecting and the astute observations of growers, horticulturists, and gardeners.

We were always thrilled when somebody was interested in buying an unfamiliar plant and happy to share our plants and our knowledge so the market would grow, a sentiment also expressed by Don Shadow on one of his early visits to our nursery. Now, it seems almost every new plant introduction is patented or branded in some way making it more expensive to grow, more expensive for the public to buy, and not necessarily any more garden-worthy than an older cultivar — just different. Many times the new introductions that shine and stand out in mass production fall short when it comes to dependability and longevity in the landscape. Can any of you think of a good example of what I am talking about? I'm sure you can!

SERVING THE WHOLESALE AND RETAIL TRADE

As a grower who serves both the wholesale and retail trade, I find customers may be interested in a few of the new patented introductions and willing to pay the higher price associated with that marketed brand; but, more often than not, they are going to opt for the less expensive cultivar which has been around for a long time. Not only do I sell fewer of the patented, trademarked, branded cultivars because of the cost, it is much more cost-effective to grow the ones that are not. For me, it has always been more prudent to maintain stock on the plants we propagate and produce our own cuttings, seed, and divisions instead of relying on outside sources. Typically, what a supplier offered a few years back has been replaced by a new, patented cultivar, or is no longer available at all.

Once, at a trade show, I was accused by an attendee of always growing “the same old stuff.” I chose not to take that as criticism, but as a compliment. I explained that I felt it was a much greater challenge to be consistent with our offerings than it was to only have the newest thing on the market. To a landscape architect or landscape designer, there are few things more frustrating than to request a classic palette of plants for an important project only to find they are no longer available from the grower because the fashion has changed — and not always for the better.

At Goodness Grows, we produce a least 85% of the perennials we offer from stock we maintain at the nursery. The other 15% is material which is brought in as seed, bare-root material, or plugs. About 20% of our production is done from seed and the rest from stem or root cuttings, or divisions. Propagation at Goodness Grows is done year-round by talented staff members who have been with me for over 2 decades.

INTRODUCTION OF NEW CULTIVARS

Over the years we have introduced 25 different cultivars of herbaceous and woody plants. Many have become mainstays and even common namesakes in the industry. Many of you are familiar with our *Achillea millefolium* ‘Oertel’s Rose’,

Dianthus 'Bath's Pink', *Veronica* 'Goodness Grows', *Vitex agnus-castus* 'Shoal Creek', and *Lantana* 'Miss Huff', to name just a few. Some of our earlier introductions have even been "re-introduced" by others under different cultivar names.

Marc and I discovered *L.* 'Miss Huff' after two of the coldest winters on record in 1983 and 1984. Ms. Ruby Huff had planted the original in the late 1950s. The plant is still growing at her home in Crawford, Georgia, about 50 years after it was originally put in the ground. That is truly a long-lived perennial!

Introduced in the spring of 1984, *L.* 'Miss Huff' is the most cold-hardy *Lantana* on the market and is the standard by which winter hardiness is measured in all other lantanas and has stood the test of time in landscapes across the southern United States. Selected for a research program by the University of North Carolina to discover what makes this *Lantana* unique, they determined it had an extra chromosome in its DNA other *Lantanas* did not have. They also discovered it was male-sterile and female-fertile, which has allowed it to be used for breeding its hardiness into newer cultivars.

Veronica 'Goodness Grows' and *V.* 'Shoal Creek' were both selections made from crops we grew from seed. Each was chosen from the rest because of its individual distinct attributes which stood out from all the others.

Dianthus 'Bath's Pink' and *A.* 'Oertel's Rose' were both pass-along plants shared with us by fellow gardeners who had cultivated them for years and recognized in them the beauty, sturdiness, and steadfastness that made them worthy of being in the marketplace.

PROPAGATION OF PERENNIALS

Many of the plants we grow from seed and from which we harvest our own seed include: *Baptisia australis*; *B. alba* (syn. *pendula*); species coneflowers like *Echinacea pallida*, *E. paradoxa*, and *E. purpurea*; *Hibiscus coccineus* and *H. coccineus* 'Albus'; *Hosta plantaginea*; mixed seedlings of the Japanese iris, *Iris ensata*; and other iris species such as *I. pseudacorus*; lilies like *Lilium philippinense*; *Lobelia cardinalis*, and *L. siphilitica*; and *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturn'.

Some plants that are done from stem or root cuttings include: *A. millefolium* 'Oertel's Rose' and *Leucanthemum ×superbum* 'Becky' (syn. *Chrysanthemum ×superbum* 'Ryan's Daisy') — and generally acknowledged to be the best "Shasta Daisy." This Shasta daisy was given to us in 1982 by the renowned garden designer, Ryan Gainey, who also shared *C.* 'Ryan's Pink' and 'Ryan's Yellow'. Other vegetatively produced plants include *Dianthus* 'Bath's Pink', *Phlox* 'Common Purple', and *Helianthus* 'Marc's Apollo'. 'Marc's Apollo' is a seedling selection made from a cross between *H. angustifolius* and *H. giganteus* 'Sheila's Sunshine' and named for my late partner Marcus Amos Richardson who died of lung cancer in February, 2008.

Some of those which are divided with crowns and roots include plants like the ginger lilies, *Hedychium coronarium* — which, by the way, is from the same stock Marc and I originally obtained 33 years ago from his grandmother's garden in Donalsonville, Georgia, Marc's hometown located in the southwestern corner of the state. Also propagated this way are *H.* 'Elizabeth' and *H.* 'Pink V', all the daylily cultivars we grow such as *Hemerocallis* 'Big Bird', irises like *I. cristata* and the named cultivars of *I. ensata*, *R. laciniata* 'Herbstsonne', and *Stokesia laevis* 'Mary Gregory' and selections of blue and white *Stokesia* seedlings. Currently, I am working on

introducing a new dwarf, weeping *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* 'Little Lace' — perfect for urban landscapes and always keeping a keen eye out for improved seedling selections while having a never-ending debate about the pervasive patenting and branding which has now become so fashionable in our horticultural industry. I am always thankful for my attentive and watchful staff for all their help and support.

It has been my pleasure today to share a sampling of the plants we produce at Goodness Grows, most of which we have been growing for well over 30 years. For many of you, they are probably nothing really very new.