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Pennsylvania Gardener Selects Plant Evaluation Program

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Pennsylvania Gardener Selects Plant Evaluation Program

Abstract

The Pennsylvania Gardener Selects (PGS) program represents a unique educational, evaluation, and marketing program that expands the opportunities for Master Gardener input and activity while benefiting the green industry and gardeners statewide. Through the PGS program, Master Gardeners have learned to evaluate plants, develop educational programs for the general public, and participate directly in the selection and marketing of superior plants for the consumer and commercial marketplace. The PGS program has been warmly received by the industry. Since 1999, the PGS program has grown to include 44 gardens in 39 of the 67 counties of Pennsylvania.

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Introduction

Penn State University has a long history of independent evaluations of plant cultivars for commercial producers, All America Selections (AAS), seed companies, and plant breeders. These trials have been conducted continuously since 1932. Evaluations provide valuable information used in commercial production decisions as well as a resource for professional horticulturists and home gardeners. Each year a number of plants in the trials stand out as superior cultivars. These plants are promoted through published performance results, magazine articles, and seminars; however, information only reaches a fraction of the people who could use and benefit from it.

The Pennsylvania Gardener Selects (PGS) plant evaluation, display, and promotional program was initiated to use this information to expand Pennsylvania plant markets through education, evaluation, and display gardens. The strength of the PGS program lies in two areas:

- An integrated marketing program for plants suited to Pennsylvania conditions.
- An emerging opportunity for Penn State Master Gardeners.

Marketing Program

The PGS program has been warmly received by the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association (PLNA), Pennsylvania Floral Industries Association (PFIA), and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Board. During the past 3 years the associations

have committed \$15,000, which has been matched by the Department of Agriculture to result in a total of \$30,000 for promotion and marketing of the program and selected plants.

The marketing program for PGS gets its direction from a grower guidance committee composed of industry members and directors of PFIA and PLNA. This committee sets the timetable for notifying growers of newly selected plants. Lead-time for annuals is currently 1 year, with the announcement of selected plants announced to commercial growers. The following year they are announced to the gardening public.

For example, plants evaluated and selected during the 2001 growing season were announced to growers in January 2002 and will be promoted to the gardening public in spring of 2003. The grower guidance committee has also registered a domain name and begun developing a Web site promoting PGS plants <<http://www.gardenersselects.com/>>.

PGS plants are promoted to commercial growers, garden centers, and landscapers in regional and statewide Extension grower meetings, through PFIA and PLNA member newsletter articles, and in a mailing promoting point-of-purchase material. In addition, the program and selected plants have been highlighted in feature articles in local, regional, and statewide newspapers. Ball Horticulture, a national plant and seed producer, prepared and distributed a national press release that resulted in several national grower magazines developing articles on the PGS program, for example *Greenhouse Manager Pro (GM Pro)*.

The program has been promoted to consumers through newspapers, displays at the Pennsylvania Farm Show, the Philadelphia Flower Show, and numerous local and regional gardening events conducted by Master Gardeners involved in the program. The statewide Master Gardener managed display and educational gardens expand visibility and accessibility of superior selected ornamental plants to every corner of the state, providing home owners and local landscape and garden center personnel a place to see and learn about these plants.

Master Gardener Program

The PGS program began in the summer of 1999 with 29 gardens in 26 of the 67 counties in the Commonwealth. Twenty-two annuals and six herbaceous perennials were evaluated. By 2001, the program grew to 44 display gardens in 39 counties. To date, the program has evaluated approximately 60 plants, of which 22 have been named to the PGS list.

The strength of the Pennsylvania program and its innovation is local involvement of Penn State Master Gardeners. They provide a local focus to generate community interest and local publicity. Master Gardeners benefit from the program through:

- Direct involvement in the evaluation and decision making process,
- Expansion of their role in educating gardeners and green industry personnel on the suitability and qualities of PGS plants, and
- Enhanced local and statewide visibility of the Master Gardener program.

Participating Master Gardeners are trained to conduct plant evaluations during a series of meetings in spring and are responsible for:

- Location of their garden;
- Garden design;
- Preparation, maintenance, evaluation of the plants; and
- Arranging and staffing educational events at their gardens.

Many individual PGS garden sites throughout the state hold open houses, and several are featured as demonstration sites during local home and garden shows. These gardens also provide a unique venue for introducing new plants and cultivars to the market and provide local garden centers, landscape contractors, nursery producers, and designers an opportunity to see first hand and evaluate products that can add to their marketing mix. In addition, display and evaluation gardens are stable statewide locations for educating consumers on quality horticultural products.

Ultimately, the Master Gardeners are perhaps the best endorsement possible for the selected plants, yielding word of mouth recommendations by respected community leaders.

General Program Management

The Penn State trial garden or commercial grower cooperators provide seedling plants for each garden. Cooperating gardens receive materials for planting in the spring between May and June. Evaluation occurs throughout the growing season. Plants are evaluated on:

- Flowering,
- Plant habit,
- Uniformity,
- Foliage,
- Growth,
- Vigor,
- Insect and disease resistance, and

- Overall appeal.

Each character is rated on a 0 to 5 scale with 0 = dead, 1 = unacceptable, 2 = poor, 3 = fair, 4 = good, and 5 = excellent. Evaluators for each garden tally ratings and submit them to the Department of Horticulture, where they are tabulated to reflect average, maximum, and minimum ratings in each category.

In the fall, evaluators meet and discuss the overall outcome of their evaluations, educational activities organized around evaluation gardens, and number of visitors attending gardens in their counties. Decisions are also made on "Plant of the Year," Gardener Selects Plants for Pennsylvania Gardens and on plants to evaluate during the coming growing season.

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