

What makes those

Proven Winners plants so special?

It's been all of 16 years since the first Proven Winners plants appeared on the garden scene changing things forever. For the first time we had access to bedding plants that seemed to be absolutely bullet proof, plants that thrived and did it with a sense of style and beauty never seen before. In the years since a bevy of new introductions have tempted and pleased us with their color, unique forms and dependability.

For instance I have a hanging basket that I put together *last* summer. It contained a Proven Winners "Snow Princess" lobularia (a plant that looks like alyssum on steroids), a perky orange *Diascia* and a heavenly blue *Nemesia*. In the fall all the plants were trimmed back — way back — protected over the winter while they languished but continued to grow. Then *shazam!* come spring that combo sprang to life with a vengeance.

A friend of mine did the same thing with a Proven Winners Laguna series lobelia, and achieved similar results. I suspect that if we were to repeat that sequence with the same

plants, the same thing would happen again all over again next spring. How can that be that those plants behaved more like tender perennials than annuals? How could these plants do that? Try

that trick with any ordinary annual and you won't get that response. This behavior needed some explanation.

So recently I asked Danielle Earnest, public relations and brand development coordinator with Proven Winners, a few questions I had about these remarkable plants. And I wanted to know what's in the future, now that Proven Winners has expanded the line to include flowering shrubs as well as those wonderful annuals and perennials too. Here's how it went:

Q: What's the difference between those six-packs of annuals and those single pots of Proven Winners plants — besides price? In other words, why should I buy the single pot of a Proven Winner selection instead of a whole six-pack of the same variety of annual?

A: Typically, what you see sold in six-packs are seed varieties of different plants. These are older varieties that have not been improved on. You will never see the same variety being sold in a six-pack as a 4-inch container. All Proven Winners are grown by vegetative cutting and most are sterile — it makes the plants more vigorous and causes them to focus on creating flowers instead of seed. With seed varieties, the plant will

flower and then want to stop to focus on seed production. That doesn't happen with Proven Winners varieties because they are sterile and want to focus on producing more and more flowers. We also

feel that starting with a larger root system creates a more successful plant in the garden. Most Proven Winners varieties are new, exclusive varieties only available through our company. Like with the new *Supertunia* "Pretty Much Picasso" — you will never see that specific plant sold in six-packs. However, you may see knock-off varieties sold in the future.

Q: I heard somewhere that Proven Winners annual plants are sterile, that is they don't set seed and therefore deadheading is not necessary to keep them blooming. Is that true, and if so is that the Proven Winners "secret" to success?

A: Yes, many of the Proven Winners varieties are sterile. When a plant is sterile it doesn't focus on creating seed and contin-

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ues to flower because it thinks it will set seed. Take for instance the new "Snow Princess" Lobularia. This species is known for seeding all over the garden and when the heat of the summer comes on it quits flowering. "Snow Princess" is sterile so it continues to flower and this variety has a heat tolerance and can tolerate summer in Dallas and Florida. The secret to Proven Winners success is that we are continually searching for new and improved varieties that are trialed and tested before they even get to retailers. We look at plants and test plants for garden performance so that gardeners will be successful with our plants. Really, I think the true secret is the fact that so many of our employees are plant nuts themselves and these true gardeners are searching for the best plants out there to share with all their gardening friends.

(Note: Because they don't set seed, Proven Winners plants will continue to bloom without the deadheading that is necessary with other annual plants.)

Q: How are Proven Winners annual plants grown if not from seed? Are they propagated by tissue culture?

A: Yes, all Proven Winners plants are grown by tissue culture.

Q: I understand that I cannot root cuttings of say, a Proven Winners coleus or one of the shrub varieties, that I plan to sell. But is it OK to root some cuttings for friends? Why?

A: We don't recommend this process. The reason that our plants are patented and propagation prohibited is to protect the

rights of the breeder. It is similar to downloading a song and not paying for it – in the end it hurts the musician or in this case the breeder. With every plant that is sold, the breeder gets a slice of the profit as their salary. When consumers take cuttings and share them with their friends, really they are taking away that royalty from the breeder. It is similar to if a writer wrote a book with a copyright and someone put a digital version online for everyone to read without having to purchase the book – the writer would be out all the royalties from people purchasing their book.

If we encourage consumers to take cuttings of plants, breeders will not be able to bring in a salary that helps them to continue to breed and bring cool, improved new plants to market. To me, when we encourage this behavior, it is almost like biting the hand that feeds us. If there are no new plants to talk and write about, what would we discuss in the spring with readers?

Q: It seems as if it was just a few years ago that Proven Winners plants became available. Is it true that it was a single annual that started the whole line of Proven Winners plants? What plant was it? How has the line grown since then?

The Proven Winners program has been around now for 16 years. Just within the last couple of years has it been able to market the plants on a consumer level – making them more well known. Yes, it is true that the program started with only four plants. One of the first plants was "Butterfly" Argyranthemum and it is still a strong seller in our line today. Today, we have 357 Proven Winners annuals, perennials and flowering shrubs in the line. This doesn't include Proven Selections, which are unique selections made by each propagator on a regional performance preference.

Q: What are some of the "greatest hits" from Proven Winners.

Why are these plants so special?

A: Diamond Frost Euphorbia is one of Proven Winners greatest hits. The reason being because this plant is nothing like any Euphorbia people have seen before and it performs differently as well. This plant can tolerate dry soil – I didn't water mine all year in Michigan and it bloomed all summer. Plus it can stand alone in a combo or be mixed as an accent plant. Almost like the new-age baby's breath for mixed containers.

The Proven Winners program is all about bringing new and cool varieties to market that make you think outside of the box when it comes to what those genera did in the past. We often hate to call a plant by its genus because people have already formed an opinion about that plant even if it is a totally new plant that has been improved on tremendously.

Take for instance "Snow Princess" – we predict this plant will be a huge success if gardeners can get past the opinions formed about sweet alyssum. It dies and fries in the heat, but this new variety doesn't – it thrives in heat and has been proven in trials to do well in Florida and Texas during the worst summers ever. Plus it is sterile, unlike the previous forms that would bloom and then set seed. This plant just keeps flowering and flowering with the vigor of a Supertunia petunia.

Q: What is the process of adding a plant to the Proven Winners list? In short, what is it that makes a Proven Winner a Proven Winner?

A: To become a Proven Winners plant, the plant is trialed at five different locations all over the world – three of the trial sites are the owners of Proven Winners – EuroAmerican in California, Four Star in Michigan and Pleasant View in New Hampshire. Once the plants have been trialed for three to five years, they are reviewed and reviewed by our trial managers. These results are then presented to the owners to see if the plants should receive the Proven Winners label. To be added to the line, all owners must agree to move forward with them. Then after we have decided to add them, the plants are shipped out to 33 university trials across the country to be trialed there as well. The next year, they are introduced to the wholesale market.

Q: Where are Proven Winners plants, shrubs and trees grown?

A: All of the Proven Winners annuals are grown at the three locations mentioned above. With the shrubs, Spring Meadow Nursery owns the brand rights to this. They are based out of Michigan, but have several licenses that grow and sell Proven Winners ColorChoice flowering shrubs to retailers across the United States and Canada. Proven Winners doesn't currently have a tree line.

Q: How many different plants carry the Proven Winners tag now?

Annuals: 235

Perennials: 31

Shrubs: 91

Q: How can I find out more about all these varieties?

A: By going to our Web site and using the search engine: <http://www.provenwinners.com/plants/>.

If you scroll to the bottom you are able to select: Proven Winners annuals, Proven Winners perennials or ColorChoice flowering shrubs.

Q: Can you suggest some of the best Proven Winners plants, shrubs and trees for gardeners in Maine, zones 4 and 5?

A: I would definitely recommend using our search engine above for this. Here a gardener is able to search for an annual for their zone and what exposure they need (sun/shade). Here are some that come up for sun exposure and Proven Winners annual: Artist Ageratum, Angelface Angelonia, Slightly Strawberry Anisodonteia, Butterfly Argyranthemum.

I would also recommend looking at what trials gardeners near you thought were great plants. Here is the link to that: [provenwinners.com/garden/trial_awards.cfm](http://www.provenwinners.com/garden/trial_awards.cfm).

Q: I know not all of the Proven Winners plant varieties are available everywhere. Where can I find Proven Winners plants to buy?

A: This is one of our all time biggest challenges and due to the supply chain we are able to see what wholesalers get our plants, but after that we aren't able to see what retailers get them. We have a program for retailers to list themselves as a retailer who carries Proven Winners. That can be found on our Web site here: <http://www.provenwinners.com/findaretailer/>.

You are able to search by your zip code to find someone near you. "Where can I find a specific plant" is our number one question on our feedback area from consumers. So this year, we decided to add an online store where consumers are able to find the plants they want – here is the link to that: shop.provenwinners.com/category.cfm?catID=35.

We felt we needed to provide an alternative to frustrated consumers not being able to find our plants. 2010 will be our first year to do this and we will look forward to improvements from consumers to let us know what they would like to see in the future.

Q: Is it possible to mail order Proven Winners plants if I cannot find the ones I want locally?

A: Yes, see answer above. Also Garden Crossing in Michigan is selling many Proven Winners varieties and it ships larger size material than some of the other mail-order companies: <http://www.gardencrossings.com/>.

Q: What can I expect in the future from Proven Winners?

A: Cool, new improved plants that will make your garden stand out from the crowd.

Q: Is there anything else I need to know about Proven Winners plants?

A: Our goal is to make the gardener successful.

And with that final answer we realize one of the main reasons these plants are so special, plants that continue to present new and exciting selections like the striking "Pretty Much Picasso" hot pink, chartreuse-lipped Supertunia for starters. Beautiful and bullet-proof at the same time. How could anyone go wrong with that combination?

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