

When is “new” really new?



BY MARIA ZAMPINI

Every year the December issue of *American Nurseryman* focuses on the latest and greatest new plants being offered up in the green industry, and the 2010 issue was no exception. In fact, there were so many new plants to profile there was no room for my column!

In a recent talk titled “Dynamics of Hypercompetition,” Dr. Charles Hall, Ellison Chair at Texas A & M University and the leading agricultural economist in the United States, stated, “New plant introductions are one of the defining ways to set yourself apart from the competition in the green industry.” He cited other examples of differentiation strategies used in the green industry, like innovative packaging and labeling, advertising and branding efforts as well as value-adding services, all of which correlate directly to new plant introductions.

It seems to me that there are more people and companies introducing new plants. Additionally, the interest for new plant introductions seems to be on a steady, upward climb. But, for every action, there is a reaction, and as such, I am concerned about new plant introductions on several levels.

First of all, there is the word “new.” What does it mean? What can it mean? What should it mean? I think it can be, and is, interpreted in many ways, and thus, I believe there is mucky gray area

being created. Currently I think a “new” plant is being defined as:

- A plant that is being listed for the first time in one’s catalog. It has been in the trade, but is a first-time offering for that particular company.
- Something that is brand-spanking new; a plant never before offered wholesale.
- An old plant that has been overlooked for a variety of reasons. Maybe it was hard to propagate and not readily available until now. Perhaps it had a really crummy name or a name that was just hard to pronounce. It may have been given a second lease on life with a more appealing trademark name and an aggressive marketing campaign.

More important, I think, is the question, “How long can you call something ‘new’?”

Somehow, somewhere along the line, vague parameters have been set that “new” means released to the trade within the last year or two. But, what has been forgotten is that there are different production cycles for different crops. There is obviously a huge difference in turnaround time for perennials or annuals versus a tree.

You can introduce a perennial today, and growers can jump on the bandwagon tomorrow and have the product to the end consumer in less than a year or two. However, if you are bringing out a new tree or shrub, it is more realistic that it won’t reach the end consumer for two to four years. At that rate, in some circles, that tree is no longer considered “new” when in actuality, it probably hasn’t come close to hitting even a fraction of home gardeners’ radar screens.

With the increasing demand for new plants also comes the added pressure to constantly have a new intro, if not multiple introductions, every single year. But, not every plant can be a huge winner like, say, an Endless Summer®. Coming up with a grand slam is the exception, not the rule. And, the days of producing tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of one plant per year are pretty much gone. So, as an introducer, you need multiple years

to get back the return on your investment. Plus, from a grower standpoint, you need a plant to be “hot” for more than a season or two to make growing it worthwhile.

People complain when there are “bad” plant introductions; those that don’t live up to their hype, and rightly so. You can have the worst plant in the world, but if you have the best marketing, it can still be “successful.” I will, however, tell you from experience that you can have the best intentions with a new plant you feel is the slickest thing since sliced bread and still encounter failure. You can test a plant for 10 or 20 years, bring it to market and suddenly it has winter dieback or succumbs to a disease that never, ever bothered it before. Let me tell you, in that case, no one is more disappointed than the introducer and/or hybridizer.

Now, you know as well as I do, people grumble about “loser” plant introductions. Across the board there will always be good plants introduced, so-so plants and yes, even some bad plants, too. But, with this new-plant focus, will people continue to take the necessary time to do proper research, testing and development? Or, will the pressure in today’s business economy leave some no choice but to come to market a little sooner than they otherwise would have? I can’t answer that question, but only hope the majority of plant introducers will continue to do their best.

While you may have heard me say this before, I think it bears repeating: Customers don’t ask you, “What’s old?” They ask: “What’s new?” New plants aren’t a fad; they are here to stay. They are one way to keep us motivated and excited about our industry, and they are definitely a way to keep customers excited and coming back for more.

Maria Zampini is president of Lake County New Plants LLC, Madison, Ohio. She co-founded the company with her father, Jim Zampini. Their focus is sales and marketing of LCN Selections along with research and development of new plant introductions. She can be reached at maria.zampini@yahoo.com.