

Branded Plants: Experiences of Working With Proven Winners®

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Kernock Park Plants is primarily a plug producer, although recently it has begun some liner production. The nursery grows more than 1000 taxa including patio plants, bedding, herbaceous plants, grasses, and shrubs.

The nursery is a member of Proven Winners, a global co-operation between nurseries which have agreed to pool resources in order to bring some of the best new plants to the ornamentals market.

Proven Winners began in the early 1990s, beginning in the U.S.A. from a European idea. The original concept was to take some of the new plants appearing at that time and present them in a new way, for example in baskets or as mixtures. Although common now, such ideas were not really being pursued by the large seed companies, which were ignoring the potential of vegetatively propagated plants. The organisation was really the start of the "patio plants" movement.

Proven Winners was formally introduced in Europe in 1998 with eight "founder members" covering territories from Spain to Denmark and into eastern Europe.

By pooling resources, members are able to achieve economies of scale and to pool plant and marketing knowledge. A large marketing organisation is also attractive to breeders who are seeking an avenue to market for their new selections. Through Proven Winners we now have around 100 breeders working on our behalf and contributing selections to our trials. Material is trialled around the world although each location tends to trial material appropriate to regional markets. The trials cover suitability for production as well as for the end consumer.

Just over 200 taxa have passed the trials stage and are available in the Proven Winners assortment for Europe, while there are many more available in U.S.A.

Most of the stock is elite, virus-indexed material, which has been a key principle from the start. Such material was not common when Proven Winners began. The aim is to ensure clean material enters the production chain, for the benefit of our customers.

PROVEN WINNERS MARKET RESEARCH

Proven Winners has developed a very strong consumer brand in the U.S.A. and has 2.4 million unique visitors per year to its website. The organisation is using its website to develop a better understanding of its consumers.

More than 100,000 responses were received in response to a questionnaire posted on the Proven Winners website. Here are some observations on the results:

Gender. Women represent 93% of respondents. We are clearly dependent on women as customers but this is a male-dominated industry in terms of decisions made about what to grow on nurseries and what garden centres purchase to sell.

Age. Sixty percent are aged 45 or older, but 70% of those who described themselves as keen gardeners say they were "hooked" by age 21.

Shopping Habits. Eighty-six percent said they shop regularly at garden centres but of these only 4% know what they are going to buy when they walk into a garden centre. That means 96% shop on impulse, which implies our consumers probably know less than we think and that we have opportunities to communicate with and inspire them.

Only 6.8% actively seek new plants while 54% say they never knowingly buy new introductions. Yet we are an industry obsessed by promoting new introductions. That does not mean we should stop working on new introductions but we must remember it is not necessarily the be-all and end-all of the business.

Almost 80% shop by colour when buying plants. Purple, perhaps surprisingly, was the most favoured colour but many others scored highly. Consumer colour preferences should influence not only the plants you choose to release, but the colours used in your marketing materials.

More than 80% said they would pay more for plants produced in an “eco-friendly” manner; and of these 53% said they would pay 5%–10% more. Would this hold true in today’s more difficult economic climate?

Although these results cannot necessarily be directly translated into the British, Irish, or European markets one should bear the general principles in mind when making decisions about marketing plants. Members of IPPS are plants people but we must remember that our attitudes towards and opinions about plants are probably not representative of those of our consumers, and we must therefore be careful about making too many assumptions about our consumers’ requirements.