Plant introductions – a grower’s view

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Summary  Ornamental horticulture has gone through many changes over the years with some of the biggest in the last 10 years. Communication mediums like magazines, books and the internet are now able to talk about many plants knowing that they are grown world-wide. Australians embrace many new products that come onto the market; just look at the uptake on mobile phones, computers and DVDs. And it seems that the interest in new plants is also very strong. I am not sure if it is the fierce Competition amongst plant retailers or the abundant beach weather distracting people from their gardens that makes Australians leaders in marketing plants, but for as long as I have known we have led the world in marketing plants to the public.

Being a part owner of a large production nursery and also a plant licensing business, I have been fortunate to travel often and see some of these changes as they unfold. One of the biggest changes has been in commercial production. We have seen the large multinationals like Thompson and Morgan, Colegrave (now Ball) Syngenta and many more change from their dominance in seed grown ornamentals to vegetatively grown ornamentals. The trend for some of the large growers in Europe and North America is to be more specialised in a reduced range of varieties, and this has led to the necessity of purchasing ‘clean’ (from viruses) cuttings. These have come from the multinational breeders that, faced with high labour costs in their own countries, have established large operations in areas such as North Africa and South America. These world-wide trends mean that there is now a greater movement of live plants than ever before.

Retailing of plants has also changed. The garden industry has now joined most other retailers in being truly national. In Australia we now have Garden Centre groups such as Plants Plus present in each state as well as hardware chains such as Bunnings and Mitre 10. Some of these are Australia’s largest retailers of plants and, as with most businesses, it is much more cost effective to market nationally.

• Fashion – we look at colours in the different flowers, even foliage and also texture.
• Climate – water wise consumers are demanding more dry tolerant plants.
• Economy – time poor/money rich consumers are after instant gratification with their gardens. Larger houses with smaller gardens now require smaller plants. The popularity of more paved patio areas has also lead to an increase in container gardening.
• Home and garden makeover shows on television have come at a time of home ‘cocooning’ which is keeping people in their homes and seeing them adding value into their houses.

These demands are driving the type of plants that breeders are developing. With Australia’s small population and market there is only a limited amount of breeding being done in Australia, hence the growth in imported overseas-bred plants.

Growers share very similar criteria in selecting plants to grow such as market appeal, disease resistance and ease of transport. The potential of weed risk is always an important consideration. Plant Growers Australia (PGA) has rejected plenty of plants due to the fact that they may be a potential weed risk in Australia.

In terms of future trends, I believe that there will be a continuing need for smaller plants as house blocks will continue to be smaller and container gardening will remain strong. The world-wide concern of the use of chemicals will mean plant breeders will keep selecting for disease resistance. I believe that countries such as Germany have already banned most chemicals for the household garden.

The issues surrounding ornamental weeds are not limited to Australia. Throughout my travels around the world and in most horticultural publications it is a constant issue. The nursery industry is very concerned with plants that may have weed potential. Most of us have become involved in the industry because of our enjoyment of working with plants and concern for the environment.