Plant Selection, Development and Preservation in North America

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Keywords perennial plants, assortment development

Abstract
Perennial plant breeders and producers in North America are well known throughout the world for their development of the genera *Hemerocallis*, *Hosta*, *Iris*, and *Paenonia*. Hostas dominate the North American market in total sales, and breeders still introduce many new *Hemerocallis* every year but the selection of perennial plants in Canada and the United States has been undergoing a significant evolution. In addition to large nurseries, numerous, small, speciality perennial plant nurseries have sprung up all over the continent.

INTRODUCTION
For many years, North American perennial garden design was dominated by English gardening style and most new plants were imported from Great Britain. The majority of gardening books were either written by British authors or were full of photographs of Great Britain’s manor gardens. As North Americans became more experienced, however, they found that most of the plants recommended in these books did not perform well in their soil or climate. The gardens that were presented required a great deal of maintenance and they were incongruous with the scale and style of their homes. Many North Americans became disillusioned with English gardening publications. At about the same time, nurseries began to import plants developed by continental Europeans. Compact, relatively disease-free and free-flowering, they quickly became part of the standard offering in perennial plant nurseries. Ornamental grasses, practically unknown as garden plants until the 1980's, are now seen in private and public plantings throughout the continent. Typical Karl Foerster perennial plant combinations, such as *Rudbeckia* ‘Goldsturm’ with *Sedum* ‘Herbstfreude’, are just as popular. European cultivars, such as *Salvia* ‘Mainacht’ and *Calamagrostis × acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’, have been selected as Perennial Plant of the Year by the Perennial Plant Association, the main organization for professionals and serious amateurs in North America.

NATIVE PLANTS AND NEW INTRODUCTIONS
Driven by the increasing interest in perennials, hobbyist breeders and nurseries started looking for and purposely selecting new and unique plants. Perhaps inspired by the many introductions of European cultivars of North American plants, many plantsmen and women naturally concentrated on native plants. In the last ten years, there has been great deal more emphasis on the use of North American native plants, and plants beneficial to native fauna.

As Canadians and Americans become more sophisticated gardeners, they look for diversity in the plant selection. Garden design has emphasized using plants for their form or structure as well as foliage texture and colour. New introductions are being imported from all over the world. “Plant Hunters” are now travelling to Asia on a regular basis, both privately and as representatives of botanical gardens. The introduction of Asian genera, such as *Epimedium*, is expanding rapidly. Most recently, tender perennials from genera such as *Salvia*, *Verbena* and *Diascia* have come into vogue. Depending on the region, these plants are grown either in the garden or in containers.

microcephala ‘Red Dragon’, and Stokesia laevis ‘Mary Gregory’.

DATABASE INFORMATION AND EVALUATION

A major problem for nurseries and consumers is the lack of an extensive, uniform and reliable perennial plant evaluation program. Of course, due to the tremendous variation in climate, soil and geography of such a large continent, regional evaluations would have to be implemented. A few botanical gardens, such as the Chicago Botanical Garden, and universities, such as the Universities of Georgia and Vermont, have developed individual testing programs.

COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

In the last two decades, the interest in perennial plants has increased dramatically and the demand for a diverse selection of genera has grown immensely. Perennials now make up 22% of all of the plants sold for outdoor gardens. Gardening has become the most popular leisure activity and more and more North Americans are looking to perennials to create lovely yet relatively low maintenance gardens. In addition, North Americans normally have more space for gardens and plants than the Europeans. Almost 67% of Americans own their own home, usually with a land area of at least 1000 m². By the year 2010, 50% of the American population will be over 55 years old, an age group that tends to place a great value on improving the home and gardens. Overall, according to a survey by the National Gardening Association (2001), consumers spent $37.7 billion on their lawns and gardens last year, up 13% from 2000. This was in spite of a poor economy. In 2001, sales of perennial plants increased over 12%, with chrysanthemums and hostas, leading the way. Still, almost 80% of the sales are made up a wide variety of other genera.

In order to maintain this interest in perennials, there needs to be a combined effort on the part of horticulturists, nurseries, and garden centres to make gardening seem fun, simple and easy. Innovation, especially with regards to presentation of the plants, is very important. Retailers must provide the consumer with the best quality perennials that can be grown, helping each customer on an individual basis. The most important goal should be the customer satisfaction so that they may feel the rewards of creating and enjoying a living garden.

Literature Cited