

# LEAFLET

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WINTER 2017 1

This newsletter started out being the Late Fall and then it became the Early Winter and it is now the Mid-Winter Leaflet. This would not be a problem except that the purpose of these Leaflets is to try to convince our customers that we are well-organized, hard-working, and on top of things here at Twixwood. And so here is what I wrote near the beginning of this endeavor: “this newsletter started out with the best of intentions; to make the world a better place. The original plan, long since over-taken by the passing of the seasons, was to list all of the field-grown material that we had so it could be dug in the fall, divided in the winter, forced in early spring, and sold in May as liners.” This schema works best when the ground is not frozen. There is now a new plan. It is to dig in March as soon as the ground thaws and before things start to grow and to divide then if there is any demand for our product.

As an introduction to our business; we have one million square feet of poly house space, several acres of open ground for un-protected winter storage which works pretty good most winters because of Lake Effect snow and moderate temperatures, and some sixty acres of field grown material. Our product is half perennial containers and half groundcover flats. There are some vines and bare root field grown boxwoods thrown in there also because I do not want this business to be either easy to organize or overly profitable; both of which would be cheating.

It is slowly dawning on me that most of the perennials—rudbeckias, echinaceas, hostas, and daylilies—are now commodities as are all of the groundcovers. This is not all bad because Pachysandra ‘Green Carpet’, Ivy ‘Thorndale’, Vinca minor ‘Bowles’ and Euonymus coloratus are keeping the lights on, the doors open, and the employees paid while we eagerly await the next hot plant that we can sell at a premium price for a few years until it too becomes a commodity. In the meantime we plan on saturating the market with groundcovers in all types of container sizes. Right now we are sticking four million ‘Green Carpet’ cuttings a year with the capacity to do twice that amount.

It was in the middle of going through this nursery business analysis along with doing some introspection about all of the decisions we have made over the years that got us into this situation—they seemed like the right thing to do at the time—that I decided we would do well to find a product that was worth more per square foot than groundcovers and common perennials. That ideal target product appears to be liners. The problem is that Hoffman already does the complete line of grass liners, Spring Meadow does the complete line of woody shrub liners, Walters does the complete line of field grown perennials, and many people make perennial liners from Stonehouse on up. The opportunity is not there for us to be in the complete liner business. However, we can do a pretty good job of over-producing some of the liners while we are making some to support our own container production.

One example is grass liners. We have field stock for making nearly unlimited liners of: Pennisetum Piglet, Schizachyrium Blue Heaven, Panicum Shenandoah, Pennisetum Ginger Love, and the

## 2 2017 WINTER

shorter Molinias—Moorehexe, Moorflame, and Variegated. As mentioned if this newsletter had been written in time we could have dug clumps from the field for winter division.

Another good example is carex. This is kind of like a grass but has a little more involved propagation schedule that we have figured out; partially by doing it right sometimes and mostly by doing it wrong many times. We will cheerfully explain all of the intricacies of the process to any member of the International Plant Propagator's Society—motto; **To Seek and to Share**. No one told us about the upcoming market for carex or we would be on top of it. Because we are unprepared we are only going to do 350,000 plugs of *Carex pensylvanica* this year, and that will be for our internal use mostly. That is all of the stock that we have. Believe me, we are going to get organized now and make over 500,000 splits next year so we will be prepared then to sell some to the outside world. These will be in 72 cell packs and 2 ½" SVD pots and 3 ½" pots.

For this year we can do unlimited quantities of *Carex* 'Ice Dance' which is one of the taller sedges with the added benefit, if you want to call it that, of being variegated. For us this is the ideal product; it grows fast, we have lots of field stock, and it regularly gets winter killed in Chicago so it has to be replaced. I hope that the landscapers in Chicago are not swift enough to catch on to this little problem and they will continue to order large quantities of the plant from us. On the other hand, I am hoping that the landscapers in Chicago are smart enough to know how to run their business well enough to be able to pay their bills. There is a fine line here that we want them to walk. I notice that the Chicago Botanical Garden just did a big planting of 'Ice Dance' right in front of their main entrance. Either they know something that we do not know or they have unlimited funding.

Every year there are some new carex varieties showing up on job specifications. One of them is *Carex jamesii*, also known as Grass Sedge, not a very original name. We had not heard of this plant heretofore but we are busy making it as fast as we can. Our plea is that anyone who knows the people who are going to specify these new plants to please get us the information so we can build up our field

stock before there is a job out there calling for 23,000 of them this year. While these carexes all look alike to me, little clumps of green blades, I am sure that there is some special esthetic (or is that aesthetic) beauty in all of these varieties of carexes that I am missing. We do not suffer from aesthetics here at Twixwood, we just try to grow things and get the correct name slapped on them.

My hopes of using this publication as a powerful sales tool were cruelly dashed when I found out that *Carex molesta* has the common name of 'Troublesome Sedge' making it a particularly hard sell to the sophisticated customer. For reasons lost in the mists of time we have 1,500 really heavy round quarts of these. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time. New Moon Nursery describes it on their website as being 'versatile'. I like that description. It must mean that it grows like a weed. We are always looking for euphemisms for us to use in this business. In their catalog they list the common name as: "Field Oval Sedge". I should have looked this up first. Anyhow, it is a native to Central and Northern Illinois if anyone cares.

While on the carex subject before it is beaten to death, there is *Carex* 'Bowles Golden'. It is yellow and whatnot and considerably larger than *Carex* 'Evergold' and it is new to us this year. I was busily overproducing it a few weeks ago and all of these smart people who I had hired to organize the nursery, rationalize the production, and make rational decisions so we neither over-produce nor lose any sales, made me stop production right in the middle of what I considered to be a good run. It is not too late to request more of this in plugs and I, ever flexible when it comes to over-production, will get right back in it.

The good news about our nursery is that we are set up for and psychologically prepared for making hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of small plants; some from cuttings and some from divisions. This is because we have been in the ground-cover business since 1968. We have the production facilities—meaning poly houses, work buildings with work stations, and trained staff—for this kind of production. The bad news happens when we set this crew into making other kinds of plants. Last year one of our oldest and best customers asked if we could custom grow 10,000 *Buxus* 'Green Velvet' for them and so in December 2015 we took some cut-

tings. Our customer showed up last summer and I proudly showed him our house of Buxus all green and well-rooted whereupon he reminded me that he had inquired about 10,000 and not the 200,000 that he was looking at. I hope the reading public does not jump to any false and totally inaccurate conclusions about the memory starting to slip with age. We are not set up to efficiently field dig these for bare root sales, although we may have to, so we would prefer to pot these up into a 2 ½" SVD pot and sell them in the Fall of 2017. Let us know. And that reminds me that we have two or three acres of field grown Buxus "Green Mountain" that needs to be sold bare root. If anyone is interested let us know and we will mail you some samples. We are not that good at describing boxwoods over the phone. 'Green Mountain' is not in demand as much as 'Green Velvet' but if you trim it up nicely you may be able to confuse the customer for a year or so and when they find out about your scam you can complement them on their green thumb. On second thought, I am not encouraging unethical behavior.

Speaking of booms and busts and guessing right and wrong there is always Rhus aromatic 'Grolow' which reminds me again that we can only sell easily those plants that we have a long tradition of growing and selling. There was a big market with high demand a few years ago and so the previous management team made the decision to not miss a sale. And so we now have 17,000 one gallon and 8,000 three gallon Rhus sitting around. One of the reasons we have so much might have something to do with our advertising. I could not find the plant in our 2016 new and cheap price list until someone pointed out that it was well hidden in the perennials section. These plants are now a year older than they were last year and in even more need of selling. We are so dedicated to selling Rhus that we have even trimmed some of them, and we do not have a tradition of growing woodies and so it is both painful and difficult to organize a trimming and spacing crew. We do not have to do that with hostas.

Rhus reminds me of the recent chat I was having with the sales personages here in the office. I was harassing them about selling more Rhus and one told me that here in Michigan the government jobs all call for 2 gallon material and then I was asked

why we did not grow it in that size and I replied, somewhat icily while clutching my chest and staggering around, that the sales personages had not, in spite of my many pleas interspersed with much whining and threats to go on hunger strikes, informed me about our customer requests so I could do something about it. We have two gallon Rhus on the production schedule now. Rhus reminds me of another story; this one about picking up 600 for sale last Fall to one of our better customers. The pickup crew was tasked with sorting out 600 'nice looking ones' from among the several thousand out there in one bloc. When I found out about this I said that it was cruel to send out our people on the quest of finding a good looking Rhus because it starts out being a scraggly looking shrub that spreads to eight feet and it is often planted in traffic islands in the middle of parking lots that surround big box stores where snow and ice and salt and salt-infused ice is piled up on them all winter long and where survivability and not aesthetics did not appear to be the primary goal. Anyhow, my staff informed me, again somewhat icily, that if our customer, a re-wholesale yard in this case, wanted good looked centered, symmetrical, and trimmed up product then this is what we were going to ship even though most of our plants were taking off sideways. This was not the time to get all philosophical on them and explain that the roots were healthy and symmetrical even if the tops were not.

We are studying the market looking for new plants in high demand that are easy to grow and we found at least some of these characteristics in Calamintha nepeta nepeta and Achillea 'Walther Funcke'. We have cutting stock enough to cover the world due to that deadly combination of enthusiasm and ignorance on my part. The Calamintha blooms all of the time, white. 'Walther Funcke' looks like a shorter version of Achillea Fireland (Feuerland) if you asked me and from a casual walk-by, so it is pretty good.

I am not sure, but I think these plants, this palette, is inspired by the work Piet Oudolf did with the Lurie Garden in downtown Chicago. We are a little late coming to this game and I sense that Roy Diblik of Northwind Perennial Garden is now the most influential person around. It is written that Roy has: "codified a naturalistic, yet artistic, approach to building garden beds" and he has obtained: "colorful and textural re-

sults". I am not sure what that means, but if it involves planting lots and lots of plants I am all for it.

One of Roy's big plants is *Sesleria autumnalis* 'Autumn Moor Grass'. I like it because we grow large, huge even, amounts of it. I hope that the native plant people do not figure out that this *Sesleria* is native to the area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, somewhere in Southern Russia. It is a clumping grass forming: "neat pale green tussocks" and a better person than I can explain what this has to do with Little Miss Muffet.

We recently discovered *Sesleria* 'Greenlee Hybrid' which is something that the famous plantsman and grass promoter John Greenlee discovered in his garden as a cross between *Sesleria caerulea* 'Blue Moor Grass', a native of Northern Europe and *autumnalis*. This hybrid appears to be shorter than *autumnalis*. Anyhow, I was busily over-producing 'Greenlee Hybrid' when the aforementioned smart people that I had hired found out and put a stop to it. We have lots more to divide if there is a demand for it. All you have to do is call the nursery office and ask to speak to the "smart people" and the receptionist will put you through to the correct office. She will certainly not put you through to me.

We have good field stock and a fairly good supply of all of the other current in big demand plants—*Salvia* 'Wesuwe', *Stachys* 'Hummelo', *Liatris* 'Kobold'. And then there are the plants that we have too many of that appear to no longer be in such great demand; and why did not someone tell us? These are the alliums: 'Summer Beauty', 'Millenium', 'Summer Peek-a-Boo'. Let us know what size you want these in, anywhere from a 72 cell pak to a 2 gallon pot, and we can get them in short order. In another year we will have lots of Brent Horvath's new introduction 'Windy City' PP.

Speaking of Brent Horvath of Intrinsic Gardens up north of Chicago a ways, there are his new *Andropogon* introductions: 'Indian Warrior' PP, 'Red October' PP, and 'Blackhawks'. These are dark red or dark purple Big Bluestems of medium height making them good accent or border plants. They looked pretty much alike to me as I walked past them in our field last summer. I am sure that the person with artistic taste and some discernment would notice the difference. In theory they are im-

proving as they were developed chronologically. We are making lots of divisions this winter of the two earliest ones and in another year will be over-supplied with 'Blackhawks'.

Brent has some other introductions that appear to me to be great improvements in foliage. The blooms are good enough, but the foliage, which, I may remind you, lasts much longer than the blooms, is outstanding. These are: *Veronica* 'Pure Silver', *Penstemon* 'Pocahontas' PP, and *Festuca* 'Cool as Ice' PP. I know, I know, everyone and their dog has a new *Festuca ovina glauca* introduction, but this one is really spectacular; and not just because we have too much of it.

While we are in the mood to sell a few plants, there are the vines. We have always been a big clematis grower, getting our bare root liners in from Poland for some 25 years. During that time Szczepan Marczyński has visited half a dozen times and spent time instructing our two long-time employees; Maggie Chapman and Dennis Schroeder, on the subtle points of clematis care. We have it pretty well figured out by now; understanding the heating regimen in the spring and the spraying, trimming, staking, tying, and spacing programs necessary to turn out a good full blooming plant in the spring. The alert reader of these newsletters will be aware that I am changing the business model of Twixwood to that of being a reliable supplier to the landscape (and by extension, the re-wholesale yard) trade. The previous management team had a different business model and all of the really good looking clematis was shipped out early in the spring to a really large account leaving our traditional (I have taken to calling them 'normal') customers with the left-overs.

This year we plan on having a good supply of clematis all summer as well as the traditional vines—*Loniceras*, *Campsis*, *Actinidias*, and others—because we are growing the complete line for several of our regular customers now. All of the vines are being produced in our largest gutter connected poly house, the one of 130,000 square feet, so they can be trimmed, tied, spaced, and shipped more easily. Usually the vines are all grown on a small trellis that locks into the pot—the new less than three quart pot that is called a gallon. The exceptions are *Parthenocissus quinquefolia* 'Englemanni' because it usually goes out to very large five and ten thousand gallon at a time orders for freeway sound barrier landscaping

and *Hydrangea petiolaris*, climbing hydrangea and its cousins: *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* ‘Moonlight’ and ‘Roseum’, because they are near-impossible to untangle from a trellis when planted in the landscape. We are going to try to remember to grow these hydrangea plants on a single stake so they can be planted near a tree or retaining wall or someplace where they can start growing.

*Hydrangea petiolaris* reminds me that one of our very best customers decided that the wave of the future was to sell this plant in a quart size container to landscapers for use as a groundcover. I am sure that was a good idea and we like to custom grow for people and it makes us warm all over to be on the cutting edge of landscape theory, however, I propagated 800 flats of quarts for this customer and sold, I think, 3 flats. The good news is that we now have a lot of heavy plants to up-shift into 3 gallon pots that another, almost as good as the best, customer tells us is the wave of the future.

Twixwood has a wholly owned subsidiary for the green roof business, Eco-Roofs LLC. The previous management team chose the name; I have too much pride. Anyhow, we do pretty good except for not getting into the business quite soon enough. That business opportunity matured in a hurry and we are playing catch-up with the main problem being that the customer base for green roofs is roofing contractors and not landscapers, so it is a long and hard selling experience. We grow roof trays in a one foot by two foot (1' x 2') tray 3 1/3" deep that is filled with some standard mix of fired clay and fired shale that is carefully designed to not blow away in the wind while on top of sky scrapers in Chicago. Usually these trays are planted with sedums as that succulent will withstand dry and cold conditions. We have over 50 varieties of sedum with all kinds of foliage color and bloom colors and the reason completely escapes me because I have not noticed any real gardeners flying around the town looking down admiringly at root top plantings. We own the mold for our tray. It is thick and stiff and has all kinds of drainage tunnels and hand holds and whatever it is supposed to have. We will sell these trays to anyone for a small profit. We can get a mold made for any other size tray, bigger, deeper, different, anytime there is a glimmer of profitability.

As said, these used to be only for sedums and

the reason was ideology, which is the reason for most wars, now that you mention it, and the ideology was that it was against the rules to ever irrigate these trays once set in place. If I do not sound ideologically supportive it is because I am not. Nowadays everything has changed with a much wider plant palette being specified. We are on top of it for the newer plants which are mostly short prairie grasses with some alliums and calaminthas thrown in for the errant gardener flying around looking for beauty. We have, just to show you what we will do for money, planted up some roof trays with *Pachysandra* ‘Green Carpet’. I guess someone had a roof in the shade and do not ask me to explain. We always have lots of over-grown left over *pachysandra* that we keep around for a few years waiting for just such an opportunity and it was a great success.

One of the prairie grasses that is starting to show up on quotes is Buffalo Grass. This is the one with the Latin name: *Buchloe dactyloides* and we have the ‘Legacy’ strain that we are happily propagating from divisions this winter. I inherited a big patch of it out in the field that we are clearing out for fumigation and replanting and so there is a lot to work with. I sure hope this is going to be in great demand in 72 cell paks.

Our recent past Fall landscape planting season was really good—there was good weather and good supply. I am reminded that next September I need to write a Leaflet explaining all about perennials and trimming and ugliness and our fancy computer system. It is my opinion that, in the Fall, the landscaper can just as easily plant a trimmed back gallon as not. After all, the bloom time is over and floppy plants look ugly. The problem is that our expensive and costly computer program takes recently trimmed plants completely out of the availability category so our sales personages cannot even see how many we have. Therefore, late next summer please let the sales people know when you can start taking delivery of a trimmed back, although very thick and well-rooted, perennial for your landscaping business. That will make life easier and better and more fun for all of us.

Speaking of complex issues that we thought were going to be easy, there are red and yellow and coral colored twig dogwoods, also known as Osier Dogwoods. These are multi-branched shrubs in the

4-7' tall area and the Latin names are *Cornus sericea*, *stolonifera*, or *alba*. One gets a choice here. Some years ago I was assured that there was a big market for these and they were easy to produce and sell. The problems are many. First of all our sales people are used to being very good at taking orders and pleasing customers. They are not good at hustling plants they do not believe in. Secondly, orders are taken for this winter decoration product in early summer and that is the last thing on our minds then. Thirdly, the customers always ask for these about a month before it frosts which is when the leaves fall off and the stems color up. I am not, personally, going to carefully pull off all of the leaves and so we have a few discussions and then do not sell any. Winter is a good time to chat up the sales personages and get things organized for next year. We do not have any idea what to charge because we are not experienced in that business. We would be happy to get paid about what normal people get paid for these twigs. We do know that we have several acres of these all healthy and growing and pretty in the winter.

And then there are daylilies. You will note, by a careful study of the new price list, that we are selling

*Hemerocallis* 'Stella de Oro' and 'Happy Returns' for fifty cents a gallon less than other daylilies. This pricing is caused by over-supply in the trade, in case anyone wondered how the laws of economics were working these days. Of course we did our part by planting several acres of these ourselves to make certain that the over-supply lasted a while. We came up with a novel idea this last summer, which was to divide into a big chunk and not a single fan when producing these popular daylilies. I think there will be a positive effect on the quality for the coming season.

After comparing last year's sales with our field inventory I came up with a further list of daylilies in over-supply that we should be able to deal with by, again, potting up big chunks.

- 'Chicago Apache' red
- 'Chicago Peach Parfait' apricot
- 'Night Beacon' dark purple
- 'Red Pinocchio' red
- 'Sunday Gloves' white
- 'Siloam Double' Classic pink

Please keep working.

*Tom Kruegel*



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