

# LEALETTE

Twixwood Nursery · Phone (269)471-7408

Website: [www.twixwood.com](http://www.twixwood.com) · P. O. Box 247, Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Our sales staff has just completed the annual fall tour of our larger customers handing out Michigan apples and, we think, lots of hugs. I do not go on these tours any more as I am not much for hugging and, besides, these days I am not filtering what I say very well. The early report is that the customers purchase solely based on price and they like Twixwood because of our good availability. If I were there in person I might have said something like “make up your mind, you cannot have it both ways”. It costs money to have good availability.

The alert reader will, by now, have studied our 2019 catalog/price list. You will have noticed that prices have been raised, although not as much as the forecasted inflation. We have many and interesting debates around the office when it comes time to produce the new price list. The sales staff want to give everything away so that the customers will love them. This is in contrast to the production and maintenance management staff. I announced in manager’s meeting that I wanted to be more profitable to be able to afford a few more loads of gravel to fill in the potholes in the drive and they had a choice of either working harder or of me raising the prices. The discussion was remarkably short after that. I am now waiting patiently for all of the other nursery growers to call me up or send cards thanking me for the new pricing. I will let you know how that went.

We have pretty good availability because we have one million square feet of poly covered houses—mostly hoop and half of which are cold frames and half with natural gas heat for minimum heat when needed and for forcing in March and April; again, when needed. One fourth of the poly area is gutter connecteds which give us a great deal of flexibility for winter production and early spring forcing. And, because we are in Michigan on this side of the lake with lots of snow cover we can over-winter a lot of plants outside. We are more or less half one gallon containers and half flats. By spring of 2019 we will have 360,000 flats—also known as trays—and 1,500,000 containers on hand, on the ground, and saleable during spring, summer, and fall 2019. Of course we pot up and stick all summer long and much of that material will be mature and saleable during the fall planting season, significantly adding to our total product available for sale in 2019.

Since taking over the nursery four years ago I have developed the business model of growing for and selling to the landscaper market. This is broken down into three sub-types. There are the large commercial landscapers for whom we can custom grow. There are the normal small and medium sized landscapers that are mostly design-build and have a holding yard at their offices. For them we will also deliver directly to the job site. And finally there are the re-wholesalers who have large yards of hard goods, tools, and plants with everything up to trees. I decided that the re-wholesalers were our ideal customer as they took regular deliveries all season long.

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And now I find out that I had over-looked one important factor here; the re-wholesalers are large enough and smart enough to hire a full-time buyer who has a computer and so that person, in order to justify their existence, puts all of the suppliers into their spread sheet and they buy from the cheapest, whereas the smaller landscapers are too busy working to spend time comparison shopping and thus they purchase based on availability, shipping, service, and sometimes, we hope, a sense of loyalty. We get cherry picked a lot these days and someday I may publicize the list of the cherry pickers people. The sales staff tells me that I should thank any and all customers who buy from us and to not say negative things about the cherry picker people. I will try.

Besides plants in plastic trays or pots, we have over 35 acres of field grown stock, boxwoods and perennials and groundcover stock beds for cuttings. These are important as they feed into our production system. We like to keep quite a few of our people on year around so that we have a stable trained work force. To that end I have developed a production system that involves digging field clumps in the fall, storing them in cold frames, dividing and potting into small cell paks in the winter, and minimally heating in late winter to get early rooting and growing. This works for grasses, carexes, alliums, geraniums, and the occasional hakonechloa, rudbeckia, or hosta. I am in charge of this part of the nursery and so there is usually a lot of over-production going on. Psychic gratification is important to some of us. These liners feed into our container production.

I should point out that I have finally, after half a lifetime, figured out everything there is to know about Vinca minor production and so we have or can have an unlimited supply of Vinca minor 'Bowles' and 'Dart's Blue' and 'Ralph Shugert'.

Our goal is to be a real operation. Many of you have not had the occasion to come and visit our nursery and take the tour of all six farm locations (we got land-locked five times). Therefore, I worry that you may get the impression from reading past Leaflets, that are often long lists of plants that I have over-produced in either a fit of optimism or enthusiasm or because of a lack of judgement caused by age, that we are not a full-sized smoothly functioning nursery and that is why I mentioned our size and production capability and our attitude.

Last summer we stuck 4.2 million pachysandra cuttings and I want to sell them all and not run out. Therefore, I need to take back all of those bad things I said a few years ago about customers who wanted short pachysandra. At that time I said that nature had created pachysandra to grow six inches every year in a May growth spurt and that there was nothing we could do about it. Last summer we did something about it and here is how it happened. We force several poly houses of pachysandra 'Green Carpet' in March and April so as to have good cuttings by the end of May. These are cut and stuck under intermittent mist. With regards to the trays of trimmed plants in four to six weeks new leaves and shoots form covering up the cut stems and so they look good enough to sell. From then on the customer is given a choice of the short trimmed ones or the natural taller ones. As an optimist I am always hoping for the ideal customer who will take a newly-trimmed tray of pachysandra because they have a customer of sufficient sophistication to understand that plants grow and in another month they will look good. Please tell us if you can use that kind of a plant. Therefore we had a continuous supply of shorter and much bushier plants all season long.

### Here is our current availability list of the main GROUND COVERS

| Size             | Pachysandra<br>'Green Carpet' | Vinca minor<br>'Bowles' | Vinca minor<br>'Dart's Blue' | Ivy, Hedera<br>'Thorndale' | Coloratus<br>Euonymous |
|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| 32ct SVD         | 15000                         | 7500                    | 5000                         | 5000                       | 2500                   |
| 32ct Peat pot    | 8000                          | 1500                    | —                            | —                          | 3000                   |
| 32ct Plug        | 3500                          | 3000                    | 2000                         | 2000                       | 3000                   |
| 24ct Standard 3" | 13000                         | 4500                    | 4500                         | 3500                       | 3000                   |
| 10ct 4 1/2"      | 7000                          | 8000                    | 2000                         | 2500                       | 6500                   |
| #1s Gallon       | 30000                         | 13000                   | 5000                         | 15000                      | 5000                   |

Because we grow our groundcover in a plastic pot, a peat pot, and a plug tray (all in a 10-20 tray with 32 units in them, same price) we manage to run out of one size or the other sometimes. We are working on our predictions of the future. Once we get our own in-house haruspex we will be all set to do some augury. It will be a little rough on the neighborhood sheep, but that is a small sacrifice to get good service to our customers. The 2 ½" SVD size is the best except that on a landscape job there is a veritable blizzard of small plastic pots being blown about after an installation. The 32 cell pak is easy to carry and to clean up after, but the dirt volume is smaller. A few of our big landscapers insist on the peat pot; after all, that is how we started fifty years ago. The problem with peat pots is that they do not last very long very well. The pots disintegrate, which they are designed to do in the soil, over the first winter and then the stolons run around through all of the pots tying things together so that things are difficult to pull apart. And so we often have a few hundred of these really nice over-grown flats that we cannot unload upon anyone. These are ideal for the high-end job where the customer has a smaller bed and requests instant maturity. We sell these old peat pot trays at a discount and they can be flipped out of the plastic tray, kicked together, and the bed is planted.

When looking at our availability listings the customer should keep in mind the fact that we will be potting up gallon perennials starting in mid-January and going all the way through summer (I mentioned this already, but repetition is good). When we have a large liner to use we can pot up in July and sell in September. Therefore, our availability for the entire 2019 year will be significantly larger than what is shown now. Likewise, the groundcover availability will be significantly more than shown. We are sticking our *Vinca minor* into a 105 plug tray and when these are potted up into a 32 something they make up in six weeks. The reason is because the roots are not disturbed in the transplanting process and thus there is no root shock to overcome. Ivy is another rapid producer. We have thousands of mature gallons to take cuttings from and thus we have nice thick runners to stick and we stick three cuttings per 32 and four per 24 so they thicken up fast.

My new favorite plant is *Liriope spicata*, the creeping and hardy variety. This plant likes hot

weather and so we dig from our very large field stock in the heat of summer and divide and pot up making product rapidly for availability all year long. We have also developed a system—far too complex to explain adequately here—for making really nice 32 plugs of *liriope*. Most suppliers do not produce anything smaller than a 4 ½" (ten count for us) in *liriope* and the reason is because they do not have large fields of it but purchase in the liners from down south. Also they probably do not have the really nice hydraulic grass and *liriope* splitter that we have to make division of thick clumps easy and fun.

The *Liriope muscaris* are an whole another story. These are clump forming and not as hardy and everyone wants them and I do not like them. They do not propagate fast enough for us to field grow them and so we are dependent upon the southern growers for starter plugs. It is a shame that everyone wants them as it is more difficult for us to produce them. In keeping with our new motto that the customer is always right we will keep on plugging away.

For years EcoRoofs has been a sister company with its own corporation because of liability concerns about heavy things sitting on a roof somewhere twenty stories up in the air. We hope that no one can figure out how to pierce the corporate veil. The main problem with the green roof business is that the customers are big city architects and not normal landscaper people such that we are used to dealing with. Then, because of the three to four year lag time between designing a building and specifying the roof supplier person and the delivery we are getting too old to enjoy the fruits of the expensive and necessary sales force. Therefore green roofs are not as big time for us as it once was. We still have lots of trays in stock and all full of sedums. We are set up to do roof tray custom growing and we have done that with special recipes including alliums, little blue-stem grasses, and even prickly pear. There are some strange people out there. My favorite was a small green roof full of *pachysandra*. I tried to not imagine what a roof in the shade looked like. The check was good so we do not want to know.

There are two things that we have inherited from the glory years of the green roof business. One is a lot of really thick plastic trays one foot by two feet and 3.3 inches deep. We own the mold up here in Muskegon, Michigan and we will cheerfully sell

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these trays to anyone who thinks that it is easy and fun to grow green roofs. The other is a large field full of sedums; eighty named varieties in fact. We like the idea of selling plug trays of these sedums. The 72 cell pak is our preferred production tray although we will custom grow in whatever a person wants. The buyer is welcome to grow their own green roof tray using our sedum plugs. These varieties are listed in the price list and the field rows are 400' long so there is a good supply of cuttings.

We have a few varieties of new and mostly patented ones that we are rapidly building up stock with. We probably will not have lots of extra cuttings this year, but keep us in mind for the future:

ellacombianum 'Cutting Edge' PP28926  
'Joyful' PPAF  
rupestre 'Making Progress' PPAF  
'Peace and Joy' PPAF  
'Rock Star' PP29036  
tetractinum 'Coral Reef'

Sticking sedum cuttings is a license to print money and so we want to encourage that business. We are due something like this. It has been a long hard life.

This winter we are making 300,000 plugs or pots (from a 72 cell to a 3 1/2") of *Carex pensylvanica*. If you have been following the saga closely, you will recall that we thought we were doing this last year and instead, we made about that number of what we now think is *Carex rosea*. We are debating whether or not to publicize the name of the nursery that we suspect of selling this to us, mislabeled, about five years ago. It was the only time that we propagated from container material without growing the plant in the field for a few years to get things correctly identified and rogued out. Most of that mistake, *Carex rosea*, is still around and bigger and thicker than ever and for sale to those with no taste. It is a good Joe-average carex and as such useable in many conditions.

As for the *Carex pensylvanica*, this is rooting in right now as it is a good cool weather grower and we have a house or two under minimum heat to get things going. Come May or June these should

be all ready to sell—72's, deep 50's, 2 1/2" SVD's or 3 1/2" 18's. We grew these in the field for a year or two and they are firmly identified and we have learned our lesson.

We are desperately building up stock in about 25 other carex varieties. As soon as these have gone through the field growing experience they will be listed. Carexes need to be divided and propagated before it starts to get hot about the middle of April, so it is winter work and thus they are not saleable until they have rooted well. One of our new varieties is, we think, *Carex blanda*, which is Eastern Woodland sedge or Common Wood sedge. It is a clumper with wider leaves. I am told that it is evergreen. I found a whole lot of it at the edge of one of the woods on one of our six farms and so we have a good stock. We will be definitely identifying it this spring when it is in bloom and let everyone know for sure.

Years ago, back when I was young, idealistic, and stubborn, I used to say that growing plants from seed was cheating and a true nursery personage only grew from cuttings rooted under mist. Times have changed and I have aged. The idealism of youth has faded. I now like to seed *Sporobolus heterolepis*—Prairie dropseed—and so we have lots and lots extra. It is in 72 and deep 50 cell paks and in the 2 1/2" size. We collected another 50 pounds of seed last fall and so I plan to continue the tradition of over-production this spring. Keep us in mind.

*Sporobolus* reminds me of 'Tara', the shorter more floriferous selection found by the great plantsman, or is that plantsperson, plantshuman, whatever, Roy Diblik. I have learned how to propagate it and will only tell everyone that it is tricky. Of course, I over-produce this one also. The problem is that it is not well enough rooted until about June 10 to sell in a newly produced plug. The flip side is that it has a really vigorous root system and so we cannot hold it easily until the middle of winter, which is when most normal people want the liner. I am pretty sure that we have some nice root bound plugs for sale now.

Our sales manager went out in the cold and looked and we have right now 50,000 plants left over from last spring of this 'Tara' grass. They are a little root-bound, but healthy looking. These are in a mix of deep 50's, 32 SVD plastic pots, and 3 1/2" 18's. We can ship them at any time, snow or rain or sleet, and if they sell this winter I will get a reputation for

prescience and thus be even harder to get along with. We think these should be potted up before they start to grow in the spring. Of course, we are going to make 50,000 more this spring, just because, and they will be rooted in by mid-June. Hopefully we can sell this in the summer, saving us the suspense of waiting all winter.

While carefully studying the price list you will have noticed that we dropped some of the slower sellers. A couple of the dropped varieties are my favorites and so I am growing them surreptitiously

at one of the locations—these are *Persicaria* ‘Fire-tail’ and *polymorpha*. They used to be polygonums and have changed with the times. Some of our really good landscaper customers in Chicago use these plants and so I want to oblige. *P.* ‘Firetail’ blooms bright red in September through November when it is dramatic. The rest of the year it should be hidden behind some nice looking plants. *P.* *polymorpha* is really tall, blooms white in mid-summer, and you do not want to be friends if you plant this in someone’s yard.

### Gallons Available by Descending Quantity

|        |   |                          |    |
|--------|---|--------------------------|----|
| 33,000 | <i>Liriope spicata</i>                        | Lily Turf                | #1 |
| 30,000 | <i>Calamagrostis a.</i> ‘Karl Foerster’       | Feather Reed Grass       | #1 |
| 25,000 | <i>Hemerocallis</i> ‘Stella de Oro’           | Daylily                  | #1 |
| 25,000 | <i>Nepeta</i> ‘Walker’s Low’                  | Catmint                  | #1 |
| 23,000 | <i>Hemerocallis</i> ‘Happy Returns’           | Daylily                  | #1 |
| 22,000 | <i>Carex pensylvanica</i>                     | Pennsylvania Sedge       | #1 |
| 22,000 | <i>Sesleria autumnalis</i>                    | Autumn Moor Grass        | #1 |
| 20,000 | <i>Schizachyrium s.</i> ‘The Blues’           | Little Blue Stem Grass   | #1 |
| 18,000 | <i>Carex m.</i> ‘Ice Dance’                   | Ice Dance Sedge          | #1 |
| 17,000 | <i>Allium</i> ‘Summer Beauty’                 | Ornamental Onion         | #1 |
| 17,000 | <i>Rudbeckia f.</i> ‘Goldsturm’               | Black-Eyed Susan         | #1 |
| 12,000 | <i>Pennisetum a.</i> ‘Hameln’                 | Dwarf Fountain Grass     | #1 |
| 10,000 | <i>Echinacea purpurea</i> ‘Magnus’            | Purple Coneflower        | #1 |
| 10,000 | <i>Geranium sanguineum</i> ‘Max Frei’         | Cranesbill               | #1 |
| 10,000 | <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>                | Little Blue Stem Grass   | #1 |
| 9,500  | <i>Bouteloua g.</i> ‘Blonde Ambition’ PP22048 | Blue grama               | #1 |
| 9,500  | <i>Coreopsis v.</i> ‘Zagreb’                  | Threadleaf Coreopsis     | #1 |
| 8,500  | <i>Hemerocallis</i> ‘Rosy Returns’            | Daylily                  | #1 |
| 8,000  | <i>Heuchera</i> ‘Caramel’ PP16560 (villosa)   | Coral Bells              | #1 |
| 8,000  | <i>Hosta</i> ‘Patriot’                        | Hosta                    | #1 |
| 7,000  | <i>Allium</i> ‘Millennium’                    | Ornamental Onion         | #1 |
| 7,000  | <i>Sporobolus h.</i> ‘Tara’                   | Prairie Dropseed         | #1 |
| 7,000  | <i>Schizachyrium s.</i> ‘Carousel’ PP20948    | Little Blue Stem Grass   | #1 |
| 7,000  | <i>Panicum v.</i> ‘Northwind’                 | Switch Grass             | #1 |
| 7,000  | <i>Pennisetum a.</i> ‘Little Bunny’           | Miniature Fountain Grass | #1 |
| 6,500  | <i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>                 | Prairie Dropseed         | #1 |
| 6,500  | <i>Parthenocissus q.</i> ‘Engelmannii’        | Virginia Creeper         | #1 |
| 6,500  | <i>Liriope m.</i> ‘Big Blue’                  | Lily Turf                | #1 |
| 6,500  | <i>Amsonia x</i> ‘Blue Ice’                   | Blue Star                | #1 |
| 6,500  | <i>Geranium</i> ‘Rozanne’ PP12175             | Cranesbill               | #1 |
| 5,500  | <i>Hemerocallis</i> ‘Hyperion’                | Daylily                  | #1 |
| 5,500  | <i>Panicum v.</i> ‘Shenandoah’                | Switch Grass             | #1 |
| 5,500  | <i>Hemerocallis</i> ‘Purple De Oro’           | Daylily                  | #1 |
| 5,500  | <i>Hemerocallis</i> ‘Pardon Me’               | Daylily                  | #1 |
| 5,000  | <i>Amsonia hubrichtii</i>                     | Blue Star                | #1 |
| 5,000  | <i>Hosta sieboldiana</i> ‘Frances Williams’   | Hosta                    | #1 |
| 5,000  | <i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>                     | Butterfly Weed           | #1 |

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My attempt in the last Leaflet to change our business model to making perennial liners was not a great success because we got few takers to put in advance orders for liners. Being a slow learner I will persist. In March, as soon as the ground thaws there are several plants that are very easy to grow as plugs for sale in Early June. Here is the list: Chelone 'Hot Lips', Leucanthemum 'Becky', Rudbeckia 'Viette's Little Suzy', Rudbeckia 'Summerblaze', Coreopsis 'Zagreb' and 'Moonbeam'. The reason we can do these is because there are way too many out in the field, easy to pull or cut. Give us a call. The timing of propagation is critical so we need to know by early March.

One item we have lots of in the field is Sesleria 'Greenlee's Hybrid'. It is a little shorter and a little nicer looking than the regular variety. It is also slow to catch on. Let us know how many hundred thousand you want.

A slight correction needs to be made to the price list and that has to do with *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*. We have plenty and all kinds of both 2 1/2" SVDs and one gallon pots of the 'Massachusetts' strain. We

do not have enough of the 'Morton' strain to sell. We are busily, desperately, building up our cuttings stock and do not have it in the 32 ct. at this time. This will be the ideal groundcover once we get enough cutting stock as it came from a limestone high PH site. It will be evergreen, having flowers and berries, and lacking in scale and crown gall. Rumors are that the Morton Arboretum might patent this plant. You will be kept posted.

And so that is our story. We hope that everyone out there works hard installing landscapes and, this year, does not stop planting just because it rains for a month at a time. We want to emphasize the fact that we custom grow. All we need are cuttings, sources of plugs, or lots of field divisions, and we will grow anything in any size. Of course it would be nice if we had some lead time to put roots on the plants. If you prefer to not buy from us, then hurry up and buy from all of the other suppliers so that they run out in mid-summer and then you will have to buy from us. We will have a good supply.

*Tom Kimmel*

