

LEALETTE

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These things come out whenever the muse sits on my shoulder long enough and whenever there is enough good news to report and so I am reporting on good availability of real *Carex pensylvanica*. We have a lot of it this year. It was dug from our own fields so we have had a year of observation to make certain that it is true to name. It was divided and potted up in January and February of 2019. It appears that landscape architects, in an obvious attempt to justify their existence, are outdoing themselves in specifying an ever-increasing array of carex varieties. They all look alike to me and so I am curious about the reasons for calling for one over the other and then I got to thinking that I should not ask or someone might give me a reason and I know the reasons would make no sense at all and I can handle only so much cognitive dissonance. We have many carex varieties in the field and are acquiring a dozen more a year in an attempt to get ahead of the market. The lesson we learned last year is to field grow our carex so that we can rogue out any misidentified ones and properly identify the rows.

The sort of medium good news is that we have absolutely identified as *Carex rosea* the 200,000 plus plugs that we made a year ago thinking, mistakenly, that it was *C. pensylvanica*. These had not gone through the field growing part of their schedule, having been only growing in pots, until we divided them. We have narrowed down which nursery out East we got the original liners from and if they pay me enough I will not publicize their name. They survived the winter in fine form, are now blooming, and samples were sent to two reliable native plant nurseries—Pizzo and Cardno JF New—where people who know what they are doing identified them uncontrovertibly. I find that these native plant people are a little different than you and me. They get all emotional over natives and provenance and butterflies and insects whereas I am able to get through life without getting emotional about any of those things. They appear to have a good market for their product, so who can argue with that. I myself would be in the native plant business except that many years ago I made the resolve to never grow a plant whose name I could not pronounce. That resolve has now passed. We want to sell these *C. rosea* plants really bad. I have refused to dump them because I like the plants that I have produced. However, if you talk to Homer, our sales manager who is a cold-blooded type, you might (probably will) receive a deep discount on these plants. He is not into collecting and saving plants. This *C. rosea* looks like a good plant for any large, more or less shady, location. As mentioned, from a distance all of these carexes look the same anyway.

The other carex news is that I found a whole lot of Slender Woodland Sedge (*Carex gracilescens*) at the edge of one of our wood lots. If you will pay money for this we can do lots of it. We only need to know your preferences before the ground freezes in November so we can dig it out. Carexes only work in the winter. The alert reader will recall that last year, before it bloomed, we made a tentative mis-identification of this plant as being Common Woodland Sedge (*Carex blanda*). At least

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we did not list it as such and you can only imagine my embarrassment. I keep wondering why our customers have such strong opinions on which carex they want when they all look alike anyhow. As soon as we get a large stock of all of the different carexes then I will promote this diversity in opinions as being a good thing.

The bad news causes me to apologize for shipping dead grass liners early this spring. What happened is that it got real cold real fast here last fall and killed the grasses and then I had made a policy decision—long since recanted—to not ship out forced tender plants early in the spring. Therefore, the grass liners had not been heated and were not showing any growth so we had no idea. Neither we, here at the nursery, nor our customers, made any money on this product so we are going to change our definition of ethical behavior and in the future put the grass liners into minimally heated houses so that the cold polar vortexes, or whatever they are, we used to just blame Canada, do not kill things and then we can ship out living green organisms.

Speaking of ethical behavior there is *Bouteloua* 'Blonde Ambition' PP#22,048, otherwise known as Grama Grass. This grama grass stuff started life being a short native prairie grass and then someone developed this striking new variety with about a 3' flower scape and a prominent blonde seed head. There are many claims and counter-claims about its winter hardiness. We know that the developer said; that it is stone cold hardy, and we know what one of our sales reps, Jayne Roberts, says; that it should all be shipped south where it will grow and live. We only know what we have experienced here ourselves. And that is that a well-established two year old row growing healthily in rich heavy soil is stone cold dead and several one year old rows growing in blow sand at another farm are nice and growing and so we will have lots, maybe 20,000, liners a year from now to sell to the unsuspecting and optimistic customer. Therefore, it appears that the temperature is not what makes the difference, it is the wetness, or the soil type, or whatever. All of our liners died last winter, a mistake we do not plan on making again. It was human error and we are not going to name the human.

I do not want to exhaust everyone with grasses, but we do have several hundred thousand plugs of *Sporobolus heterolepis*, some of which were sown

last year and overwintered outside and are thick and healthy. Some were sown three months ago and are growing nicely. Last winter the Canadian Polar Vortex people killed a house full of recently transplanted gallons of *sporobolus*, causing shortages and agony with the sales personages around the office. We will not do that again either. Our seed source is one of the several Wisconsin native seed sources who had found a strain of *sporobolus* with a high germination rate. We have our own seed orchard now and harvest about three times as much as we can ever possibly sell.

While on the *Sporobolus* subject we have to talk about S. h. 'Tara', a Roy Diblik introduction and an excellent plant. It has a different and more distinctive seed head display. We have lots of liners for the second year in a row and have figured out the propagation secret. There will be even more next year. The problem is that production is narrowly time-specific and so we can have liners in early June whereas most normal people want to pot up liners in early March. The problem continues in that this plant has enormous root production, as befits a native prairie grass, and so it is difficult to hold in a small pot or plug for a year. I have no idea how to solve that problem.

After surviving the *Carex* and Grass experience we now get to discuss things that make us money—*Pachysandra* 'Green Carpet'. We are scheduled to stick 4.5 million cuttings this summer. Let us know if you will want more than that for next year. We kind of have a protocol whereby in June we start to trim (take cuttings if you will) the trays we stuck last year so that in five weeks they will be flushed and short and ideal for whatever people want to do with them. This year shipping has been so heavy that we are a few weeks late getting to the trimming thing and then the market for our 32 count Plug tray is so intense that we are selling what we were going to trim and will never be able to catch up on that one. As mentioned a number of times, we try to be the ideal perfect groundcover supplier. We offer three varieties of the 32 count 10-20 tray all for the same price and with the same number of cells or pots and each with three cuttings stuck in them. We most often get a three cutting rooting success, but only guarantee two cuttings to ease our sorting work which costs us almost as much as the original production cost. We do the 2.5" SVD plastic pot that the company that makes the pot calls a 3". As I mentioned many years ago we are not selling

TV's, we are measuring straight across. Then we do a 2.5" peat pot which is what we started out with at Twixwood. Some people are insistent on using this peat pot and we love them except that the pot has a short shelf life. The peat starts to disintegrate about when the pachysandra stolons start to run through them all making them hard work to pull apart and plant. We always have a bunch of year old peat pots sitting around. If a person has a high-end landscaping job where the customer desires a finished look about half an hour after planting, this is the tray for you. Be sure to specify to the sales phone answering person in our office what you desire and we will fix you up. Just do not expect to be able to pull these apart and have a successful installation. You will want to flip them out of the tray and that is what you will get. The 32 ct. Plug, which we started out talking about, has much less dirt volume, but the same amount of cuttings in the same number of cells. These trays are really easy to carry around four at a time and there are no little plastic pots blowing around the yard while doing the planting. So you have choices.

One of the prominent and well-organized groundcover nurseries here in the Midwest developed their own tray design—a 24 count 3" tray. After many years their exclusive with the plastic maker of this tray design ran out and so we, who are showing rare marketing acumen and very little pride, are offering pachysandra in this package also. This is not my favorite package because it is a little shallow and then it does not fit on our racks easily and comfortably and then, to be competitive, we have to stick four cuttings per cell and sell it fairly cheaply. Aside from all that, it is a good idea and it sells like hot cakes. We are busily keeping up with the demand.

We grow lots of pachysandra in the 10 count which is the 4.5" plastic pot that used to be called a quart before truth in advertising befell us. We also grow twenty or thirty thousand gallons of 'Green Carpet'. We transplant several of the over-grown year-old product in the gallon pots and then only have to wait for the roots to hit the bottom of the pot because the tops are as thick as they can possibly be. I have no idea why anyone would want to plant a one gallon groundcover and I am careful to not ask. We make money on the product and I do not want to discourage anyone from buying these and that is making the great assumption that the customers would

believe anything that I say anyhow.

We are always acquiring new plant varieties. The theory is that for us to be a good perennial and groundcover supplier we need to have new and improved plants all of the time. This works out really well if we can sell them. We have a good relationship with Brent Horvath of Intrinsic Perennial Gardens which is as far north of Chicago as you can go without being in Wisconsin. Brent likes to breed plants and patent them. Some of his sedums are outstanding looking and I am thinking of 'Pillow Talk' PP#28,528 which is an *Hylotelephium* these days. We still call it a sedum. Our row in the field, all 400 feet of it, is beautiful looking. The alert reader will notice that we have dropped this from our catalog due to no sales. With very little encouragement we will take thousands of cuttings. Another outstanding Intrinsic plant is *Veronica* 'Pure Silver', a non-patented plant that has a fine flower spike with light blue flowers. It is the gray foliage that is low to the ground and persistent after blooming that makes this plant a good groundcover. It does not sell very much either. Another really good Brent plant that does not sell is *Penstemon digitalis* 'Pocahontas' PP#24,804. It is no 'Dark Towers' PP#20,013 but it is spectacular in height and bloom quality and is a lot better than the old 'Husker Red'.

I was talking to Brent earlier this year about his marketing plan for his patented plants. He said that he promotes some of them and lets the other ones sell themselves. I appreciate his optimism, but we wanted to be part of some program that made us more money. We are zipping on his new *Stachys*, *Sedum*, and *Rudbeckia* varieties. Plan on some of them for next year. Whenever we get enough cutting stock we will sell liners as well as finished product.

Speaking of good looking plants that do not sell themselves, there is *Sesleria* "Greenlee's Hybrid". This cross was made by the famous grass person, John Greenlee, out in California but do not let the provenance fool you. One of the parent plants is from Scandinavia and the other is from Southern Russia. It is hardy out in our fields. It looks really good. It is a few inches shorter than the regular normal *Sesleria autumnalis*, which is the parent from Southern Russia.

And now I will take a break from telling you about all of the fine plants that we have here that we

are trying to foist off (I should probably say sell) to the unsuspecting (I should probably not say that) public and instead offer some advice on how to run your landscaping business. We have never been in the landscaping business, or anywhere close to it, being nowhere near tough enough to deal with the public. Therefore, my advice does not come from experience. Our business, which is half groundcovers in flats and half perennials in one gallon pots, would be a lot easier if we did not have to trim and space our perennials so that they are short and branched and blooming all of the time. We understand that this is what our competition does to get a competitive advantage and so we are aiming at doing this. In fact, we have hired recently an experienced and college educated nursery person to assist us doing just this thing. We should introduce Brian Bunge who was with LaPorte County Nursery for years. He is used to walking around looking at plants. We are training him to look at perennials instead of trees and he appears to be getting the hang of it. Our goal is to continuously improve our quality.

In the meantime, you, the landscaping customer, can assist us in making money by not being so particular about how the perennials look when they are delivered. If they are true to name and well rooted then they will look just fine next year and forever afterwards regardless of how they look when delivered. It only takes a little more of your time to convince your customer that you are not cheating them by installing something that has been recently trimmed to about 4" tall. It appears that our inventory people have been trained (and certainly not by me) to put into the unsaleable category for a month and a half all trimmed perennials. I keep getting vague answers when I try to track down the person who made that error. Anyhow, we can ship two or three times as many short plants as tall blooming ones such as the Echinaceas on a truck. If you can use some of our special shorter versions of the perennials, please tell that to the sales personages and make a lot of representations about how you will not reject the truck load when it arrives.

The big groundcover news out of Indiana is that they will be outlawing *Euonymus fortunei* 'Coloratus' in a year or so. We have a tendency to abide by the laws and so will not be shipping coloratus to

that state whenever the time comes. As with most of the invasive plant laws, there is a shortage of rationality involved. Invasive plants are the ones that put out lots of seeds that then naturalize in the woods. It is rare to see a seed on a coloratus. We think that the botanists or whomever is tasked with deciding which plants are invasive is trying to get ahead of *Euonymus alatus compactus*, which self seeds nicely. I then looked this up on the internet and find that this is a political issue and not a botanical one, and we all know how political discussions turn out. Some people think that it is the old fashioned Winged Burning Bush, *Euonymus Alatus*, that self seeds and is invasive instead of the compactus variety. Coloratus has ended up getting tarred with the same brush.

I have been trying for years to find a good analogue for coloratus because it gets crown gall and suffers from scale insects a whole lot. The *Cotoneaster salicifolius* 'Scarlet Leader' and *Lonicera pileata* and *Lonicera crassifolia* are not hardy in Chicago. The *L. crassifolia* is not even hardy here in Michigan. This spring I could not even remember where I had planted it in the field last year. What we want is something that is evergreen all year around, maybe with a spring flower and a little fall color, and grows thick enough to drown out most weeds. The best that I have come up with is *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* 'Massachusetts'. This is the old Bearberry or Kinnikinnick. The problem is that most of it is acid loving, or at the least, has a reputation for not liking regular well-adjusted soil types. We have these in nice overgrown gallons and in 2 ½ plastic pots and we want you to try them.

Operating, as I have for many years at a high rate of optimism, I think that the next ideal groundcover will be a Morton Arboretum *arctostaphylos* introduction that they found up near Waukegan growing on some limestone outcrop. Thus, everyone is hoping that we now have a strain that is not acid-loving, but regular soil loving. We think that this will be either patented or registered and sold through the Chicagoland Grows organization. The Morton has sent me some cuttings over the last few years and I have desperately been building up stock. We will have lots of stock plants for sale next year, about June. We will get the legalities all hammered out before these are marketed. There is a trick to growing

archtostaphylos that only took me about ten years of making the same mistake to figure out. I always tell people that I am a quick learner. This plant cannot be transplanted as a rooted cutting. If the roots are in any way disturbed the plant spends about two months dying. Therefore, we grow in a plastic pot and wait until the roots are all intertwined and hold the dirt together nicely and then carefully pull them from the pot and tenderly pot them up. It is almost poetic. The 'Massachusetts' strain was selected for ease of propagation. The Morton strain appears to be just as easily propagated. We have done this for several years at a high rate of success. As with most propagation timing of the cuttings is critical followed by the right kind of heating and misting program. What really helps is to not look at the cuttings for about six months after sticking them. That is hard on the heart as they do nothing for a long time and then one day they are all rooted. I have no idea when this happens or why. And so, we are hoping for a replacement for coloratus.

Besides believing everything that Brent Horvath tells us, we are great disciples of Roy Diblik from Northwind Perennial Farm up in Wisconsin. Roy spends a lot of time trying to change how people

design landscaping. Anyhow, he promotes Aruncus 'Horatio' a lot. I have seen one of these up at the Boerner Botanical Garden just outside one of the side doors. It is not clear to me where the ornamental value comes in, but then I was a history major in college. We, here at Twixwood, do not try to inquire too closely as to the good taste of our customers. We think that they are always right. I have ordered a lot more of these from tissue culture and so we will have lots of liners by next spring. Let us know how many you want and we will order more.

Speaking of something that we do not want to miss a sale of, there are alliums. Our Hispanic work force calls them onions and as long as they can divide and pot them up fast enough we do not care. We have a half acre too many of over-grown clumps in the field of 'Summer Beauty' that we will never use up. We have almost more 'Millennium' than we can use and we are working diligently on 'Windy City' PP#28,100 along with about fifty other smaller and stranger varieties.

Perovskia



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