

# LEALETTE

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Every so often I get the sense, and I am not a sensitive person, that I leave some confusion in the wake while writing these periodic newsletters from Twixwood. I may digress a little here and there and get confused sometimes and then start to tell a story and forget where it was going and have to back up and then sometimes I get really confused and say nice things about our fellow nursery persons who most people would think were our competitors. Therefore, I am now and here going to explain what my goals are when I start out these missives: the intent is to sell plants, make money, retire happy. To do so we need to explain how many plants we have to sell and how good they look and how hard we are working and how seriously we take the business and how the children are not sending us any money so we are having to continue to work hard even at our age and how this worrying about the children not sending us any money yet is such a good intellectual exercise that we are not getting Alzheimer's yet.

Much of our gallon grass and perennial production starts out as field grown clumps—maybe half a million or more of them two to three years old. I used to say all kinds of good things about this system—field growing, producing our own liners—and mostly because it gives us an opportunity to check if the plants are true to name and to rogue out the wrong ones and to make certain of our supply chain. It seemed like a good idea at the time and then this summer we found out that our 5,000 feet of rows of what we had labelled *Hemerocallis* 'Rosy Returns' was the wrong color and I had been so happy because it had gone off patent—I got the word from Darrell Apps directly about that one—and we had so much of it. Even worse, we have no idea what the real name of this really nice short re-bloomer with a deep pink bloom is or who unloaded it upon us so we could publicize that information. We want to sell it all so be sure to order it in advance so that we have the time to make it as it will not be potted up on speculation without a name. We will have a lot of it for sale as soon as we come up with a cutesy name for it. The real Hem. 'Rosy Returns' has a soft light pink bloom, we now find out.

The other benefit of having much of our material field grown is that we can see what it looks like after a year or so out in nature and then we can describe it in glowing terms. This did not do us much good with *Sesleria* 'Greenlee's Hybrid', a really nice, slightly smaller plant than the regular *Sesleria autumnalis* (one of its parents with the other one coming from Scandinavia). I have no idea why people do not believe me when I describe something in glowing terms. The rows in the field are patiently awaiting some sales so that they can go into production.

The field growing business seemed like a good idea because we could show the sales staff what mature plants looked like and then we planted a row of *Carex emoryi* (Emory's Sedge), also known as Riverbank Tussock Sedge. It is a wetland native and emergent aquatic that grows really well out in our nearly pure sand field, full sun. In fact, it grows so well that it has taken over whatever we planted in the row next to it 3 ½' away and is continuing to spread. I used to call plants like this

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invasive until Dave McKenzie told me that ‘invasive’ was a legal term and that it was against the law to sell invasive plants in most states. Now we have to call them enthusiastic growers that fill in well and terrorize all the adjoining plants. It is one to two feet tall and deer resistant, unfortunately. We have lots of it and can make more on short notice.

This last past winter, which was a hard one around here, taught us things about *Bouteloua gracilis* ‘Blonde Ambition’ PP#22,048 which we had planted on two of our farms. One was in rich heavy soil—it all died in the winter although the clumps were several years old and heavy—and the other was in nearly blow-sand out in an open field exposed to the wind. The rows there were four hundred feet long and the plant lived nicely at one end of the row and uniformly died at the other end. I cannot figure out the variable. We hear all kinds of reports on this ‘Blonde Ambition’ thing. It is specified in Nebraska. Who knows what the ethics are of the LA’s there. The developer out in New Mexico of this fine plant claims that it is winter hardy. There are rumors about well-drained versus heavy water-logged soil, and I am beginning to believe them. We will have gallons for sale this spring and can have lots of nice liners sometime in late June 2020 if we are given any encouragement and if the customer has enough money to pay for them. We can make liners like nobody’s business. Let us know.

Speaking of fancy grass liners for late June, we can have then a near unlimited supply of *Sporobolus heterolepis* ‘Tara’. We need to be given encouragement by placing an order sometime in March of 2020. The plants will not be established before late June. We have to deal with the plant’s specificity for the time of propagation as well as our business model. We have the production system wired.

Speaking of our business model, it continues to be one of saturating the market with groundcovers—*Pachysandra terminalis* ‘Green Carpet’ and *Vinca minor* ‘Bowles’ and ‘Dart’s Blue’. If we have any time, money, employees, or space left over we make some containers of perennials whose main purpose is to sell the groundcover as a natural tie-in. We are scheduled to stick some five million *pachysandra* cuttings in 2020. We think that we have enough on hand already for sales in then. To make sorting and

selling easier we over-stick—three cuttings per 2 ½” pot and four cuttings per 3” pot—and after sticking we do a lot of hoping that most of them will root. We do not guarantee that many cuttings in the finished product; what we guarantee is enough roots to hold the dirt ball together and enough green stuff on top to cover the pot. Most of the cuttings root nicely. When we can, we trim the *pachysandra* trays in June so the product is shorter and branchier toward the middle and end of summer.

Things change all of the time in the nursery business, except for the demand for *pachysandra*. Many years ago one of my more perceptive employees, after watching us ship out truckloads of *pachysandra* every year, asked if there had been enough planted already to cover everything. The demand keeps growing. Roy Diblik is trying to limit the demand for *pachysandra*, but he is a lonely, although articulate, prophet out crying in the wilderness of landscape designers. Roy wants to replace *pachysandra* with *carex*. We, here at Twixwood, are agnostic on this argument. We are preparing for any eventuality by planting large stock blocks of every which a kind of *carex* we can get our hands on that may be in demand. We have already perfected the production technique. We are ready. You can help us be more ready by telling us which *carex* varieties you will want three years from now. We also are ready for a continuation of *pachysandra* demand. We have enough cutting beds to make ten million cuttings per year.

One other thing that has changed in the last year is the return policy we used to have on *pachysandra*. We can no longer, legally, take any returns of *pachysandra*. There is some blight or virus in boxwood that can be hosted in *pachysandra* and the new laws prevent us from taking back any mistakes in shipping or changes of mind. We used to take back, mostly from garden centers, their bright yellow *pachysandra* on the theory that it was not going to sell anyhow, and trade them with new as they might as well re-stock with good looking stuff. The bright yellow came from that deadly combination of gross over-watering, bright sunlight, and low fertility.

All that I can say about *Vinca minor* ‘Bowles’ and ‘Dart’s Blue’ (myrtle, periwinkle) and its other common name—Flower of Death—that I just learned thanks to google, is that we have finally gotten that

production system completely and absolutely wired and I am taking full credit for figuring it out. And then we wonder why Midwest Groundcovers sells much more 'Dart's Blue' than 'Bowles' whereas we have the opposite market. No one tells us anything. The fact that no one can possibly tell these two named varieties apart may tell you something. When we first got 'Dart's Blue' in from Holland, from the Darthuizer Group nursery, and planted it in the field, we could see a slight difference in growth habit or texture from the Bowles when planted side by side. Anyhow, we are going to continue growing whatever the market wants.

I have a very specific question about preparing myrtle for shipping. We would like some feedback on this one. *Vinca minor* grows prodigiously, sending out runners all over the place and then they send down roots at the node. After a while in the trays the runners get about two feet long and the customers complain that they look ugly and are difficult to plant. It is a good thing that I am able to hire empathetic sales personages because if I were on the phone and heard such complaints I would tell them to not order a plant that grew like that and looked like that if they did not like it that way and to quit whining. Our solution is to trim the runners off the flats as they are going out the door. Ideally, we would trim the runners back quite a ways four weeks before we ship so they can flush a bit. However, that is not easy to do without picking up every flat and going through it and then setting it back down and waiting and hoping we got the timing right. So, let the empathetic sales personages know, when you order the plants, how short or how long or how freshly trimmed you prefer your plants. They will send a note to the pickup crews.

Incidentally, as with all groundcovers, I prefer to sell them in the ten count 4 1/2" quart size. And now we have found a strange market for groundcover gallons—mostly *pachysandra* and *vinca* out in the Detroit area. To that end we have tens of thousands of gallons on hand. We have done many strange things in the history of the nursery and doing one more, however seemingly irrational, thing is not going to bother me, I am trying to make money and retire while leaving the nursery full of a well-trained, cohesive, motivated and competent team, and with a good reliable customer base that is not sensitive

to being called strange. The only problem has to do with rooting gallons of *pachysandra* all the way to the bottom of the pot. We have no idea why it takes so long. One of my workers suggested a perched water table and so we have moved the gallons up to a better drained pea gravel place, hoping. If we can get the customer to take a very extremely thick pot with roots only about two-thirds of the way down we will be in business; tell the sales people if you can deal with it. The sales people are trained to insist on completely rooted plants to sell. *Pachysandra* grows well without having roots seven inches long. The tops are outstanding, stolons and branches and everything.

Thinking about saturating the market for *pachysandra* reminds me of a recent report from our sales personages staff. Every fall they go on trips to visit the top one hundred customers but also to visit whomever is in the same neighborhood while driving around. The good customers get apples as their reward to stop working and to visit with us for a while. One of our customers in the Grand Rapids area was surprised to find out that we sold *pachysandra*. They had been buying perennial containers from us for some years and *pachysandra* from one of our colleagues in the business. The sales people set that problem straight forthwith, leaving me to wonder where we went wrong in our advertising. The experience left me shaken and wondering how much longer my heart could handle such bad news. I am watching my health and eating tofu so there should be a few more good years in me. In the meantime I may over-emphasize expressing what we grow and have available to sell. It helps to be blunt about these things. We do not want to miss a sale.

This is a good time to talk about price lists/catalogues. I think they are the same, but legalists among us take issue with that. A few years ago I received my initial shock to the heart when I found out that some of our larger landscaper customers in the Chicago area had upwards of twenty designers busily working away and without any hint as to what we grew and offered, or what we could grow and offer if given a few hints and some lead time. They each did not have their own catalogue for reference and we spend lots of money getting these printed, after agonizing over the graphic design and the cover color for weeks. Therefore, if your business could use

more catalogs so that each of the decision makers has one for easy reference, please call, fax, email, or write to our sales personages and make a request. A large box will show up at your place of business, to be carefully opened and distributed. We wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat worried that the secretary at the front desk carefully takes our annual catalogue mailing and files it in the proper file cabinet without telling anyone.

The groundcover business is taking a little hit from the invasive plant people who cannot tell the difference between *euonymus alatus* and *euonymus fortunei*—these are all state politicians anyhow who do not need competence, let alone any familiarity with the Linnaean Binomial Nomenclature that us professional horticulturists use, to be in their position. It appears that Burning Bush was imported in 1860 and so it has had 160 years to acclimate and spread and become invasive. Birds eat the seeds and spread it all over as an understory plant in the woods misplacing or replacing, whatever, native shrubbery. If you asked me it is a little late in the day to try to stop that plant by making it illegal to plant in the landscape. Besides, very few people have seen a berry or fruit on a creeping wintercreeper plant. In fact, the back-up cutting bed that I planted out in the field under a cover of *Acer rubra* ‘Red Sunset’ is kept trimmed down to about three inches by the herds of deer that have infested us, so they never get a chance, if they wanted, to flower and fruit.

That said, we are going to carefully abide by the laws and not sell *coloratus* to Indiana. There is a small technical problem as we are exactly fourteen miles north of the Indiana line and many landscapers, from Elkhart to Michigan City, drive up to pick up plants from our well-stocked and beautiful sales yard, thanks to Laurie. When they do that we are selling the plant in Michigan. I am pretty sure that if the customer’s mailing address is Indiana they will not get to purchase *coloratus* from us. That plant is a dog anyhow, what with crown gall and *euonymus* scale. It should be replaced with *Carex*—*Carex emoryi* to be exact. Being a dog does not dissuade us in the least from producing as much of it as the market will bear. Where it is legal keep on buying, we are keeping on growing. We, here at Twixwood, suffer from many things; good taste is not one of them.

Speaking of invasive, or illegal although not invasive, there is *Imperata cylindrical rubra* ‘Red Baron’, Japanese Blood Grass. It has striking color and texture. The green form is invasive over in Japan and the red version is not and the politicians cannot figure out that there is a difference. We have our permits renewed for another three years and can sell this plant in such surrounding states as Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Connecticut. Maybe Connecticut is not surrounding.

The careful reader of our new catalogue will find two *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* varieties listed—the old one being the classic ‘Massachusetts’ strain that was selected for ease of propagation, and the new one ‘Morton’ PPAF from the Morton Arboretum. The latter was selected from a colony growing up near the Wisconsin border in a high PH environment. The two varieties have different color and habit, but are still obviously Bearberrys. Here is what we have learned: in the summer of 2018 it rained all of the time and that constant wetness nearly killed all of our one gallon ‘Massachusetts’ plants. Therefore, we are short of good healthy cuttings for propagation this season. Cuttings are stuck in late November and root well under the regimen that we have accidentally developed. The ‘Morton’ variety, on the other hand, survived the constant rain in good form and all lived and grew long runners, which I anticipated for lots of cuttings except that our sales manager thinks that it is his job to sell plants and he sold half of my cutting stock. At least he looks good on the books and the General Manager loves him. He listed these for liners in the 2020 catalogue. I want to save them for future propagation to replace the aforementioned *Euonymus f. coloratus* that is on its way out. It may seem strange that I am taking the long view of the business at this stage in my life, but I am eating tofu anyhow and might as well get some added benefit. Therefore, the ‘Morton’ appears to handle wet, high-organic, soil of moderate PH. At least it does fine in our containers. We plan on getting a nice cutting bed going in the field shortly. And our sales manager may sell some liners to you while I am not looking.

There are two important factors to keep in mind about kinnikinnick. Firstly, and due to our production schedule, the liners in a 2 ½” SVD pot will not be available for sale until June sometime. Secondly, and

far more importantly, arctostaphylos does not survive root disturbance during the transplanting procedure. You have to wait until the roots completely hold the soil together and then carefully pull them out of the pot before transplanting. I spent fifteen years growing them in a rooted cutting tray and transplanting in the winter and, being a quick learner, I now know what does not work. When handled incorrectly they take about eight months to die, but they surely die.

If you study the price list you will notice that with the common groundcovers we offer three packages at the same price per unit. These are as listed: 32 ct, 32 ct Peat, and 32 ct Plug. At least you can figure out that there are 32 of something in each of these three trays. There is an implication, completely unstated but true, that the three trays are exactly the same dimensions—being 10-20 trays they are closer to 11" x 22" and are made out of some kind of plastic. And now to elaborate as there is some confusion even among our sales personages as to how this works. By having three different packages we are assured of running out of one of them before the others. We want to make a big spiel at this point about these being substitutable in a pinch. After all, we are planting something into the ground and once planted each plug/pot/cell has about the same looking leafy plant sticking up out of the ground and the same bunch of roots in the ground. We assume that they will all grow, which, in fact, is why we produced these in the first place.

Anyhow, and because the illustrations in the back of the catalogue are dark and unclear, here is the reality. The 32 ct classification is a tray with 32 individual plastic pots 2 ½" square on top. The term (ct) means (count) in our language. We sometimes call it an SVD pot, so named by its manufacturer, and they, of course, list this as a 3" pot in their catalogue, but our customers are too smart to be fooled by that subterfuge. As I mentioned years ago in one of my first Leaflets, we do not measure diagonally but crosswise as we are not selling television sets. The 32 ct Peat is a 2 ½" peat pot. These days the peat pots come already packaged in a light weight plastic sleeve thing which keeps the roots more or less in the pot so that things are easy to transplant after the peat disintegrates. The peat pot is pulled up, and it slides easily, and planted. The roots take off, everyone is happy. In olden times, meaning last year, the roots, mean-

ing stolons, would enthusiastically grow horizontally between all of the peat pots making the pulling of them out of the tray a challenge. After a year or so in the peat pot things were analogous to a solid piece of turf. We tried to sell this to our customers as an improved product, one they could pop out of the tray, drop on the ground, kick a little mulch around the edges and be planted without the inconvenience of digging little holes for each pot. Here, again, our customers were too smart to fall for this scheme to sell four times as many plants as were needed for a job. That is why I am being honest and describing things and also why we are going in the future with this thin plastic liner that prevents the peat pots from getting all grown together. The big selling point of the peat pot is that it is supposed to disintegrate at just exactly the right time. The problem is that our customers do not coordinate their planting and installing schedules precisely with the peat pot disintegration schedule. And finally, the 32 ct Plug is a single sheet of flimsy plastic with 32 plugs which are easy to pull out of the tray and punch into the ground. We stick the same three cuttings per plug. The advantage is ease of handling in carrying the trays of plants and ease of cleaning up as lots of little plastic pots do not need to be chased around the yard. A slight disadvantage is the smaller volume of soil mix and root ball. And in conclusion, the price per unit is the same and you get choices in packaging. We like to think that these are interchangeable at the landscaper level. At the retail garden center level only the individual plastic pots will work. At the retail level the old ladies—excuse me, good customers—always grub around the tray looking for the biggest plants leaving damage and havoc in their wake if it is peat pots.

There are other, smarter, nursery people in this world who have standardized for nearly fifty years with one type of a tray, and this is the 24 ct Standard that we are also offering. It is nominally a 3" cell. We found out that the exclusive on selling this particular plastic tray had expired and so we are buying the same tray as the other people have been using and after they have spent years telling the customers that it is better. In order to get the cell to fill out faster we stick four cuttings per cell which means that each tray of 24 has 96 plants stuck in it, which is the same as our 32 ct because  $3 \times 32 = 96$  also. I was really

happy to have fallen into this market niche until I figured out that I was getting 48 cents a tray less for the 24 ct Standard than for our 32 ct and going to the same amount of work same number of cuttings and taking up 6% more area. Something is not right here and as soon as I can figure out where the problem is we will correct it. In the meantime keep on buying.

We used to be big in the green roof tray business. We sold well-established sedum trays as well as custom grown trays with every goofy plant possible in them. We are now little in the green roof business but still trying. By the time things all shook themselves out we have 86 varieties of sedums around the nursery somewhere which we would like to custom grow and sell in the 72 cell pak size. We will sell to anyone in the green roof business so that they can have something to plug into their trays.

Our sales personages are a hardy group—they take orders, describe plants, negotiate shipping times, and check over the plants before they are shipped (most of the time). They do not like to ship out ugly plants that are returned. I do not have such qualms, on the other hand, and will sell *Convallaria majalis*

all year long although after early July the leaves start to go dormant with yellow and brown ugly streaks in them. The roots are still fine. Therefore, negotiate with the sales personages about what kind of plant you will take—whether a beautiful specimen is needed, all three feet tall and in full bloom, or if a well-rooted thick crowned recently trimmed off plant will do.

We are real proud of our shipping system. Diane and I have worked with our shipping manager, Wadia Boufares, for several years now and he is convinced that we are in the business of selling plants, so he gets the job done. Wadia works closely with the sales people scheduling deliveries all the while lining up drivers and trucks and, when not busy, he is on the dock getting things prettied up and tagged and loaded on the right racks in the right sequence. He does not like returned product and so he closely watches what goes out.

*Tom Kruegel*



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