

# LEAFLET

Twixwood Nursery · Fax (800)854-1754 · Phone (269)471-7408  
Website: [www.twixwood.com](http://www.twixwood.com) · P. O. Box 247, Berrien Springs, MI 49103

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Of importance to know is that we have continued our full press of plant production right up until the Fall of this year. All of our one million square feet of poly house space is either full, or will be by March when we are done with our winter propagation. Also some acres of outdoor space will be full. We grow many plants that will survive outside in the winter here in Southwestern Michigan and we should know which varieties those are after all of the inadvertent winter hardiness experiments we have done over the years, mostly inadvertent due to lack of forethought and planning.

We have some room for adjustments in the production depending on feedback information that we receive from our customer base in the next few months. I keep asking for precise information and do not recall receiving much, but, ever optimistic here it is again, the same plea. To start with we are capable of greatly increasing the *Bouteloua gracilis* 'Blonde Ambition' PP# 22,048 liner production although I notice that demand has dropped precipitously this year. For years I have mentioned in this newsletter that this plant dies in the winter here in the Midwest and it now appears that people believe me. If I had any idea that anyone believed what I said (or wrote) I would certainly not have wasted that opportunity by telling the truth. You can only imagine my disappointment. 'Blonde Ambition' is one of our smallest selling number of plants and so I wonder why I spend the money discussing it, except that I have the propagation of it wired and it is fun to make. We will need hints and encouragement to make lots of liners this winter.

You will note that we offer in our catalogue a *Bouteloua* g. 'Honeycomb' PP# 33,101 developed by Brent Horvath of Intrinsic Gardens up north of Chicago. It is about the same habit—tall scapes with prominent horizontal seed heads—but not of the striking golden blonde color. Brent says that it is hardy, and we believe him. The regular, short, *Bouteloua gracilis* Bad River Genotype is hardy in North Dakota.

Speaking of our continuing quest to improve our offerings and to make the world a better place, besides adding good varieties every year, we are dropping some of the problematical ones. This year we are dropping *Imperata cylindrica* 'Red Baron', Japanese Blood Grass. Too many states are calling it invasive and there is too much paperwork for us to stay legal. We think that it is incorrect to label the red strain as invasive, but we are not going to fight that battle. We still have a large bed for any significant custom grows if they are easy to do leagally.

Someday we will find the perfect replacement for Purple Leaf Wintercreeper also known as *Euonymus fortunei* 'Coloratus'. It is an ongoing struggle. Some years ago the Chicago Botanic Garden discovered *Lonicera pileata* and planted it all over. We think it all got winter killed as nothing was mentioned after that. The internet says that it is zone 5 or 6. We are propagating as much of the *Arctostaphylos Illini Beauty*™ *uva-ursi* 'Morton', PPAF as we can keep alive. This plant appears to be sensitive to water, which makes it a challenge to keep alive. We can root it easily and then it slowly dies, but not slowly enough for us to make money with it. The Morton Arboreteum people discovered this plant growing up

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along the Lake Michigan shore near some limestone outcroppings, thus hinting at a tolerance for higher PH soil. Whenever we figure out how to keep this plant alive over the summer and have enough to sell, you will be the first to know.

Speaking of a good, glossy green leafed, evergreen groundcover, you will notice in the Midwest catalog, listed in the groundcover section, something called *Cotoneaster dammeri* 'Nordic Carpet'®. This is a wonderful plant if it stays alive during the winter and I can only assume that Midwest, being a substantial and ethical business, would let you know if there were problems. We are unable to test for winter hardiness here in the banana belt of Michigan as we have, in some of our more protected areas, nearly a zone 6 ½. We are considering propagating a few hundred flats of 2 ½" liners this winter—hardwood cuttings. Let us know how many you want to purchase from us. Years ago, when Midwest first introduced this plant from Denmark we signed up for a license and paid out some money, so we are legal. This plant is not patented, the only protection is that the name is trademarked. We still like being legal.

We have one outside sales personage, one Steve Raczak, who lives in Chicago and services the Chicago and Southern Wisconsin market. He has been with us a long time since April, 2004. Usually he keeps his ear close to the ground so that we can be there to quote on the big commercial landscape jobs that usually require some custom growing. These days, now that there are fewer of these big jobs going on, he represents us to the re-wholesale yards, although they usually are big enough to afford some computer whiz who enters every supplier's pricing so they can justify their existence. In consequence we get cherry picked a lot. When I complain about that to our sales personages they point out that by the end of the year some of these are significant accounts. It still bothers me, which may account for the sales personages conspiring to keeping me off of the phone with our customer base.

Some years ago Steve R. assured me that we could never grow too much *Geranium sanguineum* 'Max Frei' or *Sporobolus heterolepis* or *Carex pensylvanica*. This is probably not a good time for me to point out to Steve that I am good at too things—poor judgement and greatly over-producing plants. By the way, if you can use a large amount of *Sporobolus*

'Tara' liners, let us know this winter as we have lots of stock plants and the timing of propagation is a very narrow window. As I understand it, this plant is named after a girl—you will want to ask Roy Diblik for that story as I do not spread gossip, very much.

Until I found out about it, Steve used to get up early to meet our delivery truck when it showed up at our garden center costumers. I asked why and he said it was so he could fix problems. When I could quit stuttering and regain some composure I pointed out that any problems with plant quality were fixed about a year and a half ago when we scheduled production, so that we had enough mature good looking plants to ship. Talking about it at seven in the morning with grumpy garden center buyers really did not affect plant quality very much. I then, with regained composure and some enthusiasm, pointed out that hustling sales to landscapers paid off much more than dealing with flighty garden centers. I will say, that these days and with our greatly improved perennial plant care person, Brian Bunge on our staff who is also our token Purdue graduate, we are kicking out garden center quality plants. I asked Brian recently what we had lots of to sell, and he said that he did not have access to plant sales histories to know if we had enough, not enough, or too much of anything, but he sure saw lots of heucheras sitting around. These new varieties are certainly gaudy enough spring to our attention, so, at the least it looks like we have plenty. That trimming and spacing appears to be a good idea. Why did I not think of that sooner?

Speaking of grasses, we now have our own seed orchards for *Calamagrostis brachytricha* which is Korean Feather Reed Grass. It is about the most plumey spectacular mid-Fall plant there is. Get it while you can because the invasive plant police have it in their sights because of its self-seeding proclivities. We have not noticed that problem over here, so cannot say. If you have a big order coming up, let us know and we will scatter a few more seeds around.

We have also a great deal of seeds for a native grass that will grow in some shade in the woods—*Chasmanthium latifolium* and it has ornamental value in a flat seed. Some years ago I got invited to give talks on ornamental grasses and I could not help myself from stating that people with no taste spray painted this dried seed head with gold spray paint whereas those with taste used silver paint. I am still wondering

why I have not been invited back.

More recently, and with the same results of not getting invited back, I spent one whole day at a winter education seminar listening to people wax rhapsodic about trees, and so when I got up to talk about perennials, I started by pointing out that where I came from trees were just over-sized weeds.

Anyhow, back to making money, you will note the large expansive hosta section in the catalog. I do not get to grow these in the field any more; we buy in tissue culture plugs for everything except Royal Standard and the reason is because there are way too many new selections being bred all of the time, each more exotic than the last one, and there is something called Virus X out there in nature that attacks hostas. Let us know if you just have to have one of the new varieties and we will buy it in. We are in the business of making money, not of suffering from good taste.

I recently acquired two books, and herein lies a story. One is *The Friendly Evergreens* 1946, reissued 1954 and the other is *Hill's Book of Evergreens* published by D. Hill Nursery Company, Dundee, Illinois, 1939. Both written by L. L. Kumlien. These are available on the used book market, well-illustrated with good photos, and they are full of good information on the landscape uses of evergreens. D. Hill is where Peter Orum first went to work when he came to the U.S. of A. from Denmark and also where he met Johnny Wilde, another much longer and much more exciting story. When my parents started our nursery in the spring of 1968 there was only one nursery magazine *The American Nurseryman* and one organization *The American Association of Nurserymen*. As you can see this was before we were obsessed with getting all of the genders precisely listed. Besides being the place for advertising, the *American Nurseryman* had a monthly column that was mostly humorous, or at least diverting, by someone with the byline Charlie Chestnut the Old Bush Peddler who was very careful to hide his real identity, mailing in the monthly column from another town than he lived in.

I was not paying much attention to the details back then, but vaguely recall that he was always trying to unload a few acres of overgrown Tartarian Honeysuckle (*Lonicera tartarica*) that he had out in the back of the nursery upon the unsuspecting. These days that plant is highly invasive and universally disliked with red berries that the birds love to eat, thus spreading

it around to all of the fence rows and woodlot edges. This trying always to unload something upon the unsuspecting has made Charlie Chestnut a great hero of mine, and an inspiration, although I note that I have had a similar success rate as Charlie had in all his years of trying. Peter Orum, in his retirement years, has had the time to track down the identity of this person, long since deceased, and it was his fellow employee at D. Hill, the above-mentioned L. L. Kumlien. Now we know.

One of my recent and unsuccessful ventures was into the Live Stake and Fascines business. These things are called osier—both osier willow and osier dogwood—and were used for wickerwork in Medieval Times. Nowadays it is for streambank restoration. As soon as I remember who talked me into this I will publicize the name. Large, government funded river and stream bank restoration projects are the only market for live stakes. At least I tried.

I noticed that a couple of years ago, back when we had a really major increase in home landscaping and we ran a little short of our main groundcovers that some of our customers threatened to grow their own groundcovers if we were going to continue to be an unreliable supplier. I have not heard how those proposed ventures went. To begin with there is a pretty high barrier to entry when getting into the pachysandra business in needing a well-established cutting bed. As an aside, we have cutting beds for ten million cuttings plus what we cut off our flats to make them shorter and more branched. We have difficulty hiring enough people to kneel out there in the cutting beds to take all of these cuttings, but we can get enough done to saturate our market. If you want to make certain that we have enough of these main groundcovers during the cyclical boom years, then you should purchase more than you need these days during the recession years so that we can keep production going at a high rate. This careful matching of the supply with the demand is a cooperative effort. I thank you in advance for your upcoming unnecessary purchases, made just to help us out.

Vinca minor 'Bowles' and 'Dart's Blue' are an whole another proposition. There are several tricks to propagating myrtle and they are all counter intuitive. Right now, we have a great many too many runners ideal for cutting and propagating. Let us know if you plan on a large order (or preferably orders) for

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this next season and we will increase our production to accommodate. Our production scheduling person is studying sales history and reading the tea leaves in an attempt to predict the future accurately. He likes to be right, and so is careful, unlike myself who does not need to be right to keep my job. Now that that sensitive subject has been brought up, my job these days is to take the bank deposit daily to the bank, to sign the business tax returns, and to sign the line of credit renewals with the bank. At least several times a year everyone has to be nice to me.

Going back to our latest product and my brain-child—liners—here is what we are doing. First of all we produce the liners for our 1.5 million containers ourselves—mostly from cuttings or divisions but sometimes from seed. The exceptions are Proven Winners® and patented plants for which we have not acquired a license yet. Therefore, we can produce extras of any of our own container plants because we have the cutting stock on hand, and we can produce some plants as liners that we have already dropped as containers but still have the stock beds. We like liners as they sell for a premium over groundcovers, which are a commodity—a nice commodity and one we are very comfortable with, but still a commodity. We make annually 700,000 carex liners, all from splits done in the winter, and one million grass liners, all from two year field clumps that we grow in our fields; again divided and potted up in the winter. As mentioned, most of the perennial liners are mist propagated from March on through August. We like to do custom grows and all we need is enough lead time to make sure the stock plants are in place and we can then get the cells or 2 ½” product rooted in time.

This year we have gotten almost one hundred new customers and we have no idea how that happened. It may be because the internet makes our availability out there, and the customers are getting comfortable with internet searches and our relationship with FedEx is such that we can ship further out than our historic six hour truck drive radius. And then we have established a good customer base in the Western Iowa and Eastern Nebraska area due to our regular delivery schedule out there. Therefore, most of our business is return customers. This makes sense because we spend a great deal of effort providing good service and we study why we have not been able to fulfill customer needs in order to correct that problem in the fu-

ture. I am, of course, always asking our customers to assist us in managing our business by them predicting their own future along with future needs. I am about to give up on that hapless quest.

In keeping with our new-found goal of providing good customer service, we take photos of our product, including photos of the roots, to send on upon request to anyone. We try to not surprise the customer by showing up with a truck load of something they cannot use. We, in fact, have nothing but respect for our landscaper customers. Anyone who deals with old ladies and a slightly hung-over crew to get the job done and then, worst of all, has to collect from them, is our kind of people. You will notice that we are not, and never have been, tough enough for that landscaping business.

We have a sales yard by the office for pickup landscape customers, usually those from within a one-hour radius. Our sales yard manager is the very dedicated Laurie McNamara. She stocks the yard by rotating through bud and bloom perennials and customs pots up 2 and 3 gallon product that is not in the catalog but useful for landscapers. We also stock some woody containers from good growers in the Grand Haven to Grand Rapids area, saving the local landscapers a half-day run to get the one or two shrubs or roses that are needed to finish a job. This winter is a good time to contact Laurie telling her what you anticipate using so she can get it ordered and then stocked in time. This does not need to be a hard order—information on what is useful and often used is good enough. We have already admitted to being far removed from the nitty gritty of the landscaping trade.

You will note that I have patiently waited until near the end of this newsletter before bringing up the delicate subject of pricing for 2023. We have gotten hints that the large perennial growers in the Chicago area already sense that they are over-produced and over-stocked for the upcoming 2023 inflation and recession year and are going to go easy on the pricing. We, on the other hand, have made the decision to increase prices by 8% so that we will be able to keep our trained, reliable, and loyal work force. At peak production time in the summer this approaches 170 people and every one of them knows that they can go to the nearest small factory, construction crew, farm, or landscaper and get a job. I did not know that we were hiring smart people back when we made the



hiring decisions 15 and 20 years ago—or I may have reconsidered the qualifications we were looking for. It is too late now so we are going to live with it and we are going to keep them. I am too old for another round of training and close supervision. Therefore, hurry up and purchase everything you can from the lower priced suppliers so that they run out before the end of summer, and then remember us.

As I have mentioned before, we are quite proud of our shipping department, which consists of Wadia Boufares and Eduin Caballero. They line up the trucks and the drivers. We rent several straight trucks with lift gates for seasonal deliveries and hire our own drivers for them. This gives better service as we can train them in good customer relationships and how to arrive at the yard or job site on time and not whenever they feel like it. We also rent a whole bunch of trailers so that the owner/operators or other trucking people can show up with their tractors, hook up and go. Or, when they come in from a run they can drop the trailer at our loading dock and hook up to another loaded one and be on their way. Dianne and I have emphasized that our money is made selling plants and that it is made with lots of regular repeat-business customers. Thus we do not treat shipping as a separate profit center, but we do attempt to kind of cover our expenses, and shipping these days has its expenses. With the hours of service rules we buy motels quite often. It is negotiable but sometimes we will drop racks and pick them up a few days later on some back-haul. If any of our customers wants to be in the trucking business, then we encourage that. You can send your own trucks and drivers over and our crew will load them up.

One problem that I have seen with that option is something we note with one of our local landscapers—the truck they send is always about half the size needed to haul the plants and there are no shelves or racks. If they want the plants stacked, our crew will stack them, but it pains us to spend a year or two growing a very nice plant, only to crush parts of it during the loading and hauling process. We have not, so far, rolled our own folding rolling racks onto other's trucks, but that is, like everything else in life, negotiable and possible if you are easy to work with. A truck with something called E-lock track is needed along with either an aluminum E-track beam load bar or some tie down straps with E-lock fittings at their

ends. We rented a truck from one of the low bidders once, and they were quite casual about screwing in the E-lock and concomitantly quite huffy when we told them it was not a good quality job. After the first trip when the E-lock was pulled out and all twisted up and the racks of plants were strewn around the truck bed, we chose a different truck supplier.

Speaking of trying to unload plants on the unsuspecting; some years ago I really liked *Sesleria autumnalis* 'Greenlee Hybrid' which is equally hardy and 3 or 4 inches shorter than the species—it is a cross between the species and some *sesleria* from Scandinavia. And so I planted about eight long rows in our field and it is still there. We can divide and pot up as many liners as you want with the proviso that the ground not be frozen or too covered with snow when we go out there to dig them, maybe next March sometime.

These days we are trying to be just like our professional colleagues in the business—we finally put in a display garden, except that, unlike the real nurseries who put the garden in around their office, ours is way back and the far end of a 95 acre field. At least there is a gravel road to get to it. We do not have room to get everything into it, but some times of the year it looks quite dramatic; lots of blooms. One of our key persons, Alfonso, takes pride in this garden. He handles weed control. Now that it is all planted and labelled and weeded, what you may have suspected would happen is happening—the perennial liner crew goes out there and takes cuttings. It is hard for me to complain about something that is making me money, so I smile and wave as I drive by.

We encourage all customers, potential customers, and fellow nursery people, of however gender name they prefer to be addressed, to come by, look at our facilities and walk the display garden. This last season we have had both the Midwest and Hortech management teams come through for a several hour tour. I enjoy giving the tours, telling war stories, explaining the history, and, sometimes I get so caught up in the moment that I have caught myself even telling the truth, letting slip a few very expensively learned plant production and propagation techniques.

When it is time to compose one of these Leaflet newsletter things, I often ask the sales personages what kinds of information they want communicated. They are not usually very forthcoming as they do not

want to get blamed for something that I may say, however they have suggested that I tell the story about the nursery name. No other nursery in the whole world is named “Twixwood”. My parents, George and Lou Kimmel, were an interesting couple—sufficiently interesting that I could never work with them, so only drove truck and thus met all of our early customers, which is how I learned the business. My mother was the most intelligent, and my father was the most intellectual, always observing always wondering about how and why things were happening. Lou did the phone calling, book keeping, employee supervising, and talking to people. George did the planning and thinking, landscaping and building, both of which he was nuts about. George had strong aesthetic opinions, with one of them being that a business should never be named after the person who founded it. And so he tasked my mother with the difficult task—actually he tasked her with all of the difficult tasks—of coming up with a business name. There were 33 acres left from the original 80 acre fruit and berry and asparagus farm after most of it was subdivided and that land was either river bottom land that flooded every third year or it was just below a fen and had a very high water

table, thus not perking enough to be buildable. There was a row of silver maples along the half mile fence that bordered the old gangster estate (Louie “Little New York” Campagna) and there were trees along the other (southern) border on the hillside above the fen and so my mother observed that the land was between trees—hence Twixwood—for betwixt. The trees are still there and every other square foot of land that can be built on is covered with poly houses. The original Hillcrest location is the smallest of our five farms. We had difficulty predicting the future and thus got landlocked several times as the business grew and as I could not resist trying to keep up with all possible growth opportunities.

As Dianne has said to me many times, building more poly houses was not a sign of intelligence. Maybe that is because I have continued the family tradition of being the intellectual, planner, and dreamer, leaving Dianne with keeping up with the accounting, personnel problems, insurance, paying bills, and getting along with our banker. We do not agree on everything. We are still married.

*Tom Kimmel*



P. O. Box 247,  
Berrien Springs, MI  
49103