

LEALETTE

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Fortunately for all, we are having good spring weather this spring. So far it is nice and warm and the deluges are yet to come, apres-moi and whatever. I am going to take full credit for the good weather, good planting season, more sales, happier times than last year. I think my employees blamed me for the poor sales last spring (2022) and so I am going to take full credit for the good weather this spring. We wholesale growers of nursery stock live and die by how well the landscape business goes, by how hard the landscapers work, by us guessing right about which product to grow for the trade.

I was going to start by saying that a lot of thought went into these newsletters, but the more astute reader will figure out that there is a lot more of worry, but not much more of thought, going into them. You are receiving these right in the busy season, and my apologies. Maybe we will get some feedback on how to grow the right plants at the right time for the market.

Before I forget, we want to sell lots of Vinca minor ‘Dart’s Blue’. It is just like Vinca minor ‘Bowles’, (‘La Grave’) in that you can barely tell them apart, same rounder leaf and large prominent blooms, clumping habit. I found this ‘Dart’s Blue’ strain at Darthuizen Nursery, Leersum, Netherlands, while on a nursery tour of Holland organized by Aart deWit of Grand Rapids. It was an outstanding experience including a small boat trip through the canals of Boskoop. Dart’s Blue was being promoted as being more resistant to black stem rot (phomo or Phomopsis caused by Phoma exigua) than the regular Bowles. We do not have that problem any more because of great success with Pageant® or another name for the same chemical, Pristine®. The internet suggests Cleary’s 3336 or mancozeb but we have had no need to test it out.

And so I imported five thousand plants from Darthuizen in the summer and they arrived with black leaves from being wet and hot and grew out of it nicely and we planted long rows of them beside Bowles and from a distance you could see they were different—only by a very slight shade of green difference and texture. Otherwise one cannot tell them apart. We did not do a test for black stem rot resistance, but only take Darthuizen’s word for it.

The reason we want to sell lots of Vinca minor ‘Dart’s Blue’ is because we have lots of it and it is very full and lush and our Bowles is starting to get lighter and sparer. Our sales personages are very good at their jobs, however, talking people into trying different plants is a whole another aptitude that we are working on. Feel free to order some Dart’s Blue from us now. The Bowles will be thick and good in a few months, so do not despair.

The big event in recent past was Twixwood receiving the Distinguished Supplier Award from the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association (ILCA). These are the people who run the iLandscape trade show over in Schaumburg, Illinois every winter, the one that replaced the old Mid-Am show that imploded during one of the recessions while being nudged along by the spectacular rise of internet advertising and sales. I got all excited

about this award because the rumor was that I could give a big acceptance speech. The first rumor was a half hour speech, and then it got cut to a fifteen-minute speech, and then reality hit hard when I was told it was five minutes, no more. For some reason, when thinking of me in front of a microphone, our sales rep in Chicago, Steve Raczak got nervous, the person putting on the meeting got nervous, my employees got nervous. A suggested speech was written, rehearsed and timed by others, somehow my good judgement was not trusted.

I did not give that speech as it did not fit my persona, so then I was going to talk about my innermost feelings and was, again, informed that no one was interested in that, and for all kinds of reasons. Then I was going to talk about our million square feet of production facilities and the fifteen million cuttings we stuck and rooted under intermittent mist every year and was told that was a boring subject and instead I should thank everyone—mostly the sales staff and the customers.

Instead, I thanked our shipping manager, Wadia Boufares, for finding truck drivers who could pass the drug tests, show up to work on time, and deliver all over and to job sites, getting the product to customers who all wanted to be the first drop in the morning. And then I thanked our human resources person, Nxumalo Ruhaya, who has been able to get the I-9 forms filled out so properly that I have kept out of jail so far, which is no small feat given that most of the people in the office do not knock themselves out covering for me as they do not think that I do any useful work around the nursery. And besides, they think my wife could use the break.

Finally, I figured out what useful information the landscapers of the world needed to hear from me, and so I pointed out that our big advantage is that none of our employees; with the exception being Brian Bunge (Purdue) and Beth Hooley (Michigan State), had a hort degree or had taken any landscaping design classes, and so none of us suffered from good taste, or in my instance, had any pride left. Therefore, we grew for the market—you ask for it, we grow it. As an illustration of how low we will sink, last year we did a big custom grow of *Lysimachia clethroides*—thus illustrating the fact that we really do have very little pride. Anyone who will grow Gooseneck loose-

strife is desperate, or getting old and looking for some gold for the golden years, something.

For some reason this reminds me—the getting old with failing memory and getting desperate for a little money—of a brief conversation I had last winter at the Michigan show up in Grand Rapids. Someone, whose name I forgot to write down, asked if we had any *Persicaria amplexicaulis* ‘Firetail’ for a big institutional job they had. I said we had some in quart pots for the last five or six years as I do not throw anything away. I am sure that we can pry these out of the ground and chop them into small pieces with a machete and make new plants. The foliage of this plant is green, which means nondescript, and thus best hidden in the landscape behind some foot tall useful plant. The big selling point is the bright red blooms are on thin scapes so they appear in the air far above the foliage. The bloom time is August until frost, guaranteeing that it will never sell at a garden center. This plant is only used by the sophisticated landscape designer, or one with a lot of confidence, or one who got paid for the job in advance.

Persicaria reminds me of *P. polymorpha* which was Wolfgang Oehme’s favorite plant for a while, but he was landscaping an eighty acre estate for a rich and famous person in Northern Indiana, Rolling Prairie, at the time. A large dynamic big leafed and gaudily white flowered plant is needed when the view is a quarter of a mile. Of course Wolfgang looked me in the face and also told me that I would make money if I could grow enough Cup Plant, *Silphium perfoliatum*, which lives for a hundred years and gets at least twelve feet tall. It is almost scary, it is so tall and healthy looking. Lots of yellow blooms that do not make a good cut flower, limiting its marketability. You should try some.

Word must have gotten around that I believed most of what I was told and so we have been offering a wide selection of very nice blooming big Sedums. These are better than ‘Autumn Joy’ and ‘Indian Chief’ that started this whole big Sedum thing back in the 1980’s, bright blooms, persistent seed heads into the winter that catch a nice topping of snow. Sometimes we get desperate in the middle of winter and look out the window for any sign of life. I remember Bill Heard from the Des Moines area driving out to our farm to bring me a few bare root Autumn Joy to get us started, over forty years ago. I recommend these days Pillow

Talk, Peace & Joy, Plum Perfection, Carl, not all of which are selling good enough for us to continue the offering.

The moral is that when we find a new introduction, we get our production going and list it and hope. We are licensed to grow patented plants from Intrinsic Gardens and Chicagoland Grows and as many others who will grant us licenses. I am told that our customers would like us to send out good descriptions, photos, and recommendations. On days when I am grumpy, I think that the landscapers are the people who put their names in the Yellow Pages advertising their knowledge, expertise, good taste, whatever and so they should apprise themselves of knowledge about new introductions and then tell us that they will buy truckloads of same. Our job is to grow everything while getting the right name on the name tag and that is it.

Speaking of getting the right names on the plants reminds me of the times we have been sold plants with the wrong names and happily propagated them until we were informed of the error. Fortunately the memory is fading enough so that I cannot remember all the names of the suppliers. I remember that a few years ago we got a big custom grow order for *Waldsteinia fragarioides*, which is a native plant. And so we ordered in a bunch of liners and potted up the gallons for the order and then took cuttings and dropped our older *Waldsteinia ternata* to grow only the native species. I see in our 2018 catalog that we state that “The two species are nearly identical in look and performance but *fragarioides* is the North American native sometimes called *Geum fragarioides* and it is gaining popularity.” We were all innocent on this one, the liner supplier and us. They were the same *W. ternata* plant all the time, hence the “nearly identical” look. The only way to tell the difference is the placement of the sepals on the bottom or back side of the flower. We are on the list for the first real ones coming on market and when they arrive we will get all geared up for production of the correct native plant and we will let you know.

And then a few years ago we got sold *Carex rosea* in place of *Carex pensylvanica* and made a couple thousand flats of the wrong thing. I almost figured out who had supplied us with the mislabeled plug but the founder of that company had just died and so some

disorganization was understandable, if not excusable, and so I have not disclosed my suspicions. Back when *Panicum ‘Northwind’*, a very good Roy Diblik selection, was popular it appears that we got sold some seedlings and did not have the real plant. That has been corrected and we have plenty of it and it is good. I am trying to forget the *Hemerocallis ‘Rosy Returns’* fiasco as, again, the supplier snuck another plant in on us, which was a good plant in all respects except that it was a dark pink and thus not the correct Darrel Apps introduction. And now we cannot even sell the wrong plant as we do not have the name for it. I am trying to forget these errors as the professional reputation of the nursery is all we have going for us and now I am wondering who brought the subject up in the first place.

As mentioned, the Chicago ILCA people were not interested in my innermost feelings. Someone has to listen to them. Hence, we are loaded up with gallon perennial material. Last year we ignored all the nay sayers on TV who predicted a recession and market collapse. We continued with the full non-stop potting up production schedule of perennial gallons all summer, fall and winter. The resultant good availability appears to be continuing and ongoing, mostly because we have raised our prices above the market in the Chicago area. There are many good, and apparently more economical, perennial and groundcover growers over there. Our sales rep in the area, the aforementioned Steve Raczak, long suffering, tells us that he listens to complaints about our pricing.

First of all, I and the other owner, Dianne, set the pricing, all based on our guess about inflation, the market, and the future actions of the other suppliers. Sometimes we guess wrong, but we have guessed right often enough to stay in business. We keep hoping that the other suppliers will run out of plants and so we will be the only ones with inventory left. In the meantime, try to not give Raczak too many suggestions about our pricing or he will have to ask us for a raise for putting up with all the harassment and then we will have to increase our prices again next year so that we will be able to afford him. I can see an ongoing and very long cycle starting here. The other suppliers/growers here in the Midwest should like me for being the pricing market leader and so I am waiting patiently for notes of appreciation and cards of thanks to start pouring in. So far the only thing that has developed is my patience.

I have indulged my interest in minor players and have snuck in some production on the side. I made 165 flats of 2 ½" Cotoneaster dammerii Nordic Carpet®, (5,000 individual plugs) quite by accident, and they are a good groundcover analogue for Purple leaf wintercreeper, minus the euonymus scale and crown gall. We paid our fee to Midwest and so we are legal. Besides, they know where we live which increases our tendency towards honesty. We plan on upshifting these into the 4" 10 count tray if someone does not buy the liners first.

Back to us putting things on the market that we hear about and are told will be in great demand, there is Hoary Scullcap, *Scutellaria incana*. And so we grew a bunch, put them in the catalogue and waited. We are still waiting. Your first clue about these weeds is when the description says "attractive flowers". Reading between those lines is the fact that the plant itself is not attractive, but looks exactly like a weed. I wanted to list it because I really liked the name.

This fascination with the lesser plants reminds me of going out in one of our several woodlots and digging up some *Podophyllum peltatum*, May Apple to normal people. I was reminded of what I learned from paying fifty thousand to Kraft Associates for management consulting work. Kraft's stock in trade was giving good advice to businesses exactly like ours—a mom and pop business that started from nothing because mom and pop were intelligent, hard working, and lucky enough to fall into a business with a good market at the time. Of course my parents expanded geometrically (logarithmically to the aficionados) until they were way beyond any ability to manage it well. And then I took over and kept on going. The only thing good we had going was to have made enough money to afford the management consultant.

What mom and pop should have been doing instead of the working hard which got them going is to have evaluated, fired, and recruited, hired and trained personnel until we had really good ones in place. Promoting the hard workers they had started with was usually not the recipe for success. And they should have been instituting set procedures for all of the activities in the business so that fires did not need to be put out all of the time and one did not have to figure out how to do things over and over and the training should have been automatic.

Instead, as the business got larger and larger such that mom and pop could not keep track of it, mom and pop retreated to how they had done things back when they got started—worked longer hours at the more menial tasks. I thought about this while I was out digging up May Apples in the woods and the other 167 employees were milling about, kind of doing the right thing, but without a lot of analysis going on. Mostly I thought about how I had gotten my money's worth from hiring the consultant because now I knew why I was out with a potato fork swatting mosquitoes in the woods instead of sitting in the air-conditioned office interviewing potential managers. I was doing exactly what the book said that people such as myself did automatically. As soon as I figure out if it was atavism or just plain stupidity causing all this, I will let you know. In the meantime, buy more of these little known plants that I am busily making.

Little known plants reminds me of *Scirpus fluviatilis*, River Bulrush, which, of course has a new name—*Bolboschoenus fluviatilis*. I sold some once twenty years ago and have kept it around waiting for lightning to strike twice. It is one of those plants that grows in mud. There had been a big flap about storm drains, or water holding areas, or something such as that back then. At the risk of appearing to be cute, I will say that the whole water holding thing dried up. I still have the plants.

Instead of my innermost thoughts, we are trying to sell some plants—in fact sell all of them that we have on hand. We have many Alliums. They are amazingly easy to propagate by division. They are hardy enough to overwinter outside in pots. They do not require trimming or dead heading or much of anything, getting better the longer they are in the pot. We have 23,000 Allium 'Summer Beauty' gallons, all thick and healthy looking. And we have 28,000 Allium 'Millenium' gallons in the same superlative condition. I have no idea why people buy them, but keep on doing it.

We have great quantities of Black-Eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia Goldstrum*, the seedling variety which gets septoria fungus on the leaves. That minor detail does not appear to harm its popularity, or maybe it is running on inertia with the landscaping community being used to it. We will sell 12,000 gallon pots of it this year plus some liner trays of seedlings.

As we understand it, R. Summerblaze, which is a lower growing one, produced from cuttings, gets less Septoria than the seedling Goldstrum variety. For real resistance we suggest the two patented ones from Intrinsic, ‘American Gold Rush’ PP# 28,498 or ‘Glitters Like Gold’ PP #30933’. These are both good varieties and we have them in quantity. We are geared up to sell some 5,000 gallon pots of ‘American Gold Rush’ this year plus we are licensed to sell liners. We collect the patent fee and send it on to Brent Horvath and he likes us. We have 500 flats of the 38 liner plug trays ready for sale and can produce many more in a hurry. ‘Glitters Like Gold’ is a foot taller, so it makes quite the statement, but is less popular. We will sell a thousand gallons this year plus many flats of liners. If you want the regular old seedling variety we are not going to argue, just take your money.

Sedges, which are Carexes to the learned people around here, look like little bunch clumps of grass. They are not. They are the latest hot thing for replacing pachysandra as a shade loving groundcover. Some are short, some are tall, some can be mowed, and some are wildly spreading. Most are native, which is a better sales pitch than Pachysandra that comes with the common name of Japanese Spurge. That is a hard one to pass off as a native. I suggest that you google the Mt. Cuba Center garden place out in Hockessin, Delaware and look under “Carex as Problem-Solving Perennials” and “Carex for the Mid-Atlantic Region” for this lengthy report on a four year study of a whole bunch of carexes. They have photos and descriptions and are pushing them. We have about thirty varieties floating around which we are busily paring down to the ones that sell. Ours are available in the deep fifties cell paks and the 18 pak. Mostly we bump up into the gallon size. We mostly like propagating these into the fifty pak as that involves making a lot of small divisions, which is our specialty. We have an edge on the native plant grower people. They are a little different (I was going to say a little strange) as they insist on growing plants from seeds that they collect. We made three-quarters of a million plugs from splits last year and are geared up for doing more this next winter. These come in deep 50’s and gallons.

As you can see, the groundcover market is changing all of the time—English Ivy and Purple-leaf Wintercreeper and Lily of the Valley are falling into

disuse—while *Liriope spicata* and carexes are going big time. Our *Liriope* 2 ½” pots are really thick. This grows in the open sun and looks just like grass from a distance. We dropped *Epimediums* as they all had some virus or the other and we cannot keep European ginger alive for very long. On the other hand we are going more every year with *Asarum canadensis* which is a native of this area in spite of the name. This has the gray-green fuzzy appearance with a very nice habit of overlapping roundish leaves. As an herbaceous perennial it disappears in the winter only to come up nicely in early spring. Let us know if you will want greater quantities for next year than what we usually grow, or in which size container. We produce it in June, so we can use the phone call from you giving us hints in order to plan our production numbers.

Just showing that it is difficult to predict plant fads or trends, hostas have come back into popularity and so we have geared up production accordingly. Someone should tell us about these things ahead of time. These days we are growing all of our hostas from tissue culture plugs, bought in from reputable labs. Years ago I really liked field growing hostas, splitting in the winter. I then developed a propagation technique that I learned from Roy Klehm that quintupled the production rate for winter production, and from the late Bill Brincka, who had been on the Hosta Society board, a similar increased rate of propagation for mid-summer. And then I found that hostas get root knot nematodes if left in the field for several years. Later on I found that hostas get Virus X from just plain existing and the only cure is to burn the plant. That sounds to me more like a solution than a cure. Now we do the tissue culture plug, have no health or disease problems, and also, no competitive edge. However our lives are simplified and you get a whole lot of the newer varieties of healthy plants.

We have already this spring produced 2,000 flats of deep 50’s of *Sporobolus heterolepis* ‘Tara’, another fine introduction by Roy Diblik of a wild collected plant. We like it a lot and produce it from splits as it does not come true from seeds. If you will want more than our usual production numbers, let us know as we start our stock plants by early summer. We like to do ‘Tara’ a lot and are good at it. Speaking of *Sporobolus* grown from seeds, we just made 3,000 flats of deep 50’s of them and have about enough seeds for

that many more, just let us know. Back when I was in charge we greatly over-seeded the trays, which, I think crowded them out a lot. These days more rational minds are in charge and about five seeds are aimed for per pot or cell. Remember that *Sporobolus* is just nuts about growing roots and any cell, plug, or pot that we grow will come pre-root bound, requiring that either the bottom of the root ball be sliced off or some vertical slicing with a utility knife be done or you will be quite old before the plug starts to root out and grow.

The grasses are starting to ship early this year. Usually we do not ship them until August or thereabouts when they are the tallest and in full flower. As I mentioned last year, we like how this works out—it is all psychologically fulfilling. Tall grasses, like tall echinaceas and tall rudbeckias, take up a lot of volume in the delivery trucks, making for uneconomical shipping, except that is the time of the year when we are sending out half-full trucks anyhow just to keep up the regular delivery schedule which, as we understand it, makes for happy customers. We do not really care if they are happy, only if they come back next year, but on second thought maybe they have to be happy in order to do that, therefore I take back my statement about

us not caring. Anyhow, we get to see the trucks going out chock a block full and that makes us happy.

We will sell at least ten thousand *Panicum* ‘Northwind’ gallons. And about 25,000 *Calamagrostis* ‘Karl Foerster’ gallons, plus liners. We have more heucheras than you can imagine in more kinds of colors and still sell over seven thousand gallons of ‘Palace Purple’, the cheap seedling variety, probably more momentum going on.

The echinaceas are likewise of many colorful varieties. We will sell 9,000 *Echinacea* ‘Magnus Superior’ and 5,000 ‘Cheyenne Spirit’, a very colorful seedling mix, and 7,000 PowWow® Wild Berry.

We will probably over-produce again this summer and plea again next winter for more sales and there will be the much-predicted and much-anticipated recession and we will then cry a lot. We are like the frog and the scorpion crossing the river—we cannot help but do what nature designed us to do, which is to make as many plants as we possibly can. We hope that this works into your plans also.

Tom Kruegel



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