

# LEAFLET

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We are happy to be here, it was a good year to be a wholesale nursery grower. We hope that you, our customers who are mostly in the landscaping business, are likewise happy in spite of having to deal with customers and after all that work, having to collect from them. I am supposed to tell all our customers that I love them, at least that is what my sales people tell me to do, and I respond to them that my stock in trade in this business is credibility and any credibility that I may still have would be destroyed by any general and universal expression of love. I am also aware that somewhere between 85% and 95% of our business is repeat which means that I am going to act happy and cheerful around any present or future customers regardless of my innermost feelings or inherited tendencies. I have also explained to the sales department personages the importance of absolute honesty in describing plant material and also how they should make good any mess-ups that may slip through our inspection system. The hardest part is that they are supposed to act happy and cheerful throughout the entire process. I hope they do not all ask for a raise.

While on the subject of sales staff training, I always emphasize that it is the policy of Dianne and I to never say anything negative about our fellow groundcover and perennial growers. In one of the earlier Leaflets I confused (to my great joy) many people by starting the letter with the mention of Hortech 800 875-1392 and Midwest Groundcovers 847 742-1790 thinking, mistakenly as it appeared, that doing so was a sign of self-confidence on our part. These days I want to avoid confusion on the part of our customers and will have to explain that I did it on purpose because I could not possibly think of anything funnier. On second thought, that may still confuse people.

In the groundcover department we are increasing our production of the 32 count 10-20 tray in the either blow molded or injection molded plug tray. I keep forgetting which one is which but am trying to describe the thinnest plastic. The advantage of this tray for the landscaper is that a person can easily carry two trays in each hand, firstly, and secondly, that there are none of those 2 ½" plastic pots blowing around in the wind after the planting is done. Peat pots have been dropped completely, even in the poly-pak which kept them from growing together after the peat has disintegrated. The growing together with roots intertwining slowed down the planting process and that reputation lingered.

Along this same line of reasoning you will note that we are offering nearly all of our perennials in a 38 cell pack. We grow these for our internal use as we make one million gallon pots of perennials and grasses annually. And so we might as well produce a few extras and sell them to other perennial container growers—it is more efficient for shipping. Now, I notice that landscapers are using these plugs in place of a #1 container, which makes even more sense—ease of shipping and installation. We can get a finished container in two to three months from a vernalized plug, and so it may as well grow in the ground and save shipping a pot of dirt cross country. Liners are something we are good at doing as we have a labor intensive, rather than a capital intensive, business and

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have the infrastructure to cut, stick, and root over fifteen million cuttings a year. We are susceptible to suggestions as to what you want us to make. We will establish cutting stock for liners even if it is not something we plan on offering as a container.

This planting small and watching them grow reminds me of why we are not selling trees. It started with my father who noted that every year he got a year older and every year any field grown tree or shrub got larger and heavier while a 10-20 tray of groundcover stayed the same weight. If we were selling trees, the customer would get a baggie full of acorns plus a pamphlet of tofu recipes, and the reason is because I have read that vegetarians live ten years longer than regular normal well-adjusted people. Sooner or later the vegetarians will realize that this additional ten years is tacked on to the wrong end of life and then they will be in really poor humor. Make a note to stay away during that time.

The latest thing for new and improved perennial introductions is patented plants. Thus we have gotten signed up and licensed to propagate and pay royalties for as many of the patent licensees or licenses possible. Now then, there is a subtle issue here, which has to do with expired patents and current trademarks. Ethics enters in here somewhere and is immediately ignored by the plant breeders. One example is Geranium Rozanne® with the common name being Gerwat and now it has an expired patent. The originator of any plant gets to name it. And another is Carex Bunny Blue™ with the common name *C. laxiculmis* ‘Hobb’. It is legal for us to propagate these plants as long as we sell them under the common name, not the trademark one. As a practical matter and because of book keeping and computers and all, it is easier for us to put on the trademarked name and to pay the license fee and try to act happy and cheerful. If we get a large custom grow job with special pricing then we could avoid the fee and use the common name.

As you carefully study the new catalog you will find two new Carexes—FEATHER FALLS™ (‘ET CRX01’ PP#26,199) and RIBBON FALLS™ (‘ET CRX02’ PP#29,950). To begin with this little story shows to what lengths we will go to bring new improved better plants to the market. And secondly, this reminded me of my new and favorite book by

one of the best writers ever, John McPhee, *TABULA RASA* which means something like empty slate in Latin and his short story *The Monks of Pharma* which is about that very same topic. The drug companies know that a patent lasts only twenty years but a brand or trade name which is trademarked lasts forever and so the drug company tries to make the brand name attractive but the generic name a “polysyllabic nightmare”. And this cannot be done by your average authorial hack, these are the people who came up with Advil and ibuprofen for the same pill. McPhee admired the skill needed to coin a new mellifluous name to trademark and another one—preferably unpronounceable—as the common generic name. We are pleased to see that the nursery business is keeping up with the times.

And now back to the new 2024 price list, quickly skipping over the 5% inflation caused pricing increase, and even more quickly avoiding any political comments about inflation’s original cause, and going on to our elliptical logo on the cover. Up through 2020 it listed Vines along with groundcovers, perennials, and grass. These days all vines have been dropped—we ran out of space and skilled clematis growers—to be replaced by carex (which should be carexes while the grass should be grasses). We assume that in the excitement of the price increases you will overlook such niceties of grammar and convention. For the really old-timers, before vines there were herbs, and this was my error in forecasting that the world was about to be over-run by hippies interested in herbal medicine. I am admitting this error in judgement because there were too many witnesses and so cannot deny it. And then we had a nursery tour and someone noted that I was growing *Chrysanthemum vulgare*. Properly humiliated we dropped all herbs—medicinal and culinary—and instituted an eradication program for mugwort. It has been a long hard road conceptualizing the nursery trade..

As mentioned before, we make about one million grass liners annually and about three/quarters of a million carex liners. These are mostly done from division and we are very good at it with the only limitation being that these are done in the winter. We are too busy in the summer making pachysandra to do anything else then. Also, carex does not like it hot and grasses die as soon as the roots desiccate in the

sun and heat and wind. That said, we have our own seed orchards of *Sporobolus heterolepis*, *Chasmanthium latifolium*, and *Calamagrostis brachytricha* thus insuring a continuous over-production of same. Seeding is done in March, so let us know if you want more than we expect and forecast. We can seed them in any tray, cell, or pot you want if the order is large enough to justify the extra supervision, computer entries, thought and analysis required.

Also, as mentioned before, we can do unlimited quantities of *Sporobolus h. 'Tara'* and *Bouteloua gracilis 'Blonde Ambition'* (PP#22,048). We have the production tricks figured out. The limitation is only us having enough stock plants for the divisions and this takes an extra year to get into production; get us the information early. The limitation on us doing 'Blonde Ambition' used to be our conscience as this plant is reputed to die in Chicago in the winter either from the cold or from wet heavy soil. We found that by charging a premium for the plant we are able to overcome the conscience problem. Also, you may note that Korean Feather Reed Grass has the biggest, largest, and gaudiest seed plumes of any of the grasses. It is really good for those with no taste, besides being cheap for us to grow.

Every so often a customer will call in requesting suggestions for which plant to landscape with—and then go into great detail describing their problem area and problem customer. We have decided that if we can hire sales personages who show up on time, answer the phone with a cheery “How can I help?”, and then get the order entered correctly on the computer, we cannot expect to train them in the niceties of current landscape design. We do try to get them up on the sun and shade, wet and dry plant differentiations. My incentive for not developing landscape design skills in our sales people is because I am not the person who put my name in the Yellow Pages under landscaper. I had assumed that those people would meditate on ethics, truth in advertising, and a few other things—pride mostly—and avail themselves of the many winter trade shows with lectures on design. Also, there are a dozen or so nursery publications that address this topic, there are many books. I am told that there are schools that offer this information. We attend every trade show and educational seminar offered in our attempt to learn.

In other words, we are not in the landscape advice business. Whenever someone messes up and gets me on the phone my initial reaction is to unload upon the unsuspecting whatever mistakes I make in guessing what the demand would be. Our sales people are trained to be nice, ethical, informed, and nice, thus they keep me off the phone.

By way of apology, we attempt to maintain continuity in our sales people. In the last year we have lost Beth Hooley to grandchildren. We are understanding, having recently acquired two above-average grandchildren ourselves, and wish her well. We lost Shelly Chaffee to, we think, burn out from being too nice to customers all of the time. Then, the two replacements for them were transitory. We will go into the details whenever there are a few extra pages in the Leaflets to fill—this is not the month for extra pages. We are trying to get important information on our plant availability and our production capability out to our loyal customers. Our sales staff assure me they are getting much better at interviewing and hiring these days. In which case the practice has been worthwhile. We got where we are today being inveterate optimists, and thus hope that they got it right. Things look good so far.

If you miss my usual introduction to these newsletters by stating that I am not senile yet, it is because the sales staff personages told me that they were tired of reading the same thing every year, and besides, me being repetitive was a sign of senility. This reminds me that I start my Christmas letters with the announcement that “We are still married” which seems to be a little inappropriate for a technically informative nursery newsletter. We are still married.

Last year we ran a little short on *Liriope spicata* resulting in a new resolution for that to never happen again. Fortuitously, if this plant is held over for a year or two in the same pot, it only gets better—more rhizomes and whatever. The Hillcrest location is producing ten thousand flats to augment the usual production schedule at the Twixwood North location, twenty minutes away, landlocked and all. The big jump in sales last year surprised us. We noticed that one of our better Chicagoland landscapers who had gone heavy into *Brunnera macrophylla*, the common green one, as the general all-around groundcover some years ago had too much winter loss and was now one of the larg-

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est liriopae buyers. We have our own very large stock bed of creeping lilyturf and the production times are not sensitive. Let us know if you foresee an unexpectedly large demand coming up.

And now, while we are on the apology tour, we ran a little short on gallons of *Vinca minor* 'Bowles' and then substituted 10 count, which used to be a quart and then became a 4 ½" and then that got left out in the rain and shrunk some more. At least we are legal and on page 85 you can see our Container Specifications along with their Legal Volume which is listed in Quarts, Liters, fluid ounces, and mL, which is millilitres. These are all volumes based on the density of water. And so now we are legal although not necessarily informed. Anyhow, we ran a little short on 10 count and are making them up the same way—large clumps, poly houses, spring heat.

Because I get great psychic gratification from over-producing plants, we usually have fifty thousand gallons of vinca sitting around, except that our bureaucracy armed with a computer is keeping close tabs on my activities these days. Fortunately, back when the computer was not looking I produced several thousand flats of vinca, now overgrown, and ideal for potting large clumps of into gallons and quarts for quick growth and early sales and good quality. We are devoting two poly houses to winter production of these above mentioned shortages and should be in good shape come May or for sure by June.

Now on the subject of burps, or is that bumps, on the road to success, I understand that we had one or two with regards to *Hakonechloa* this past year. I brought up the subject with our plant health/production people and they did a fine job of equivocating, obfuscating, and passing the buck such that I cannot remember the details, but am satisfied that I hired very smart people and can now relax. I think they over-produced because of my suggestions and then a disease showed up that they did not get under control in time and now all is well for the future because they have figured out the cause and the cure.

While we are on the phone, figuratively at least, here are a few other details. *Sporobolus* is a very vigorous maker of roots, such that the little pots or cells or whichever the liners are grown in become

immediately root bound. Therefore, when potting up or field planting you should make some vertical slices of the root ball with a utility knife or cut off the bottom of the plug or both. Next, *Galium odoratum*, previously known as *Asperula odorata* and commonly as bedstraw because in Medieval times and for religious reasons they only bathed once a year and in the winter things got odoriferous, so dried galium was stuffed into the mattresses. By the way, the dried herb is essential for making May Wine. For landscaping purposes you need to know that this is a cool weather plant, looking good in the early spring and the fall seasons. In the heat of August it looks a little ragged, tempting a person to trim it some. Avoid that temptation as cutting it back in the heat of August kills it dead. Keep in mind that this is a herbaceous plant and so goes dormant in the middle of winter—it just looks dead then.

The standard groundcovers such as periwinkle (*vinca*) and pachysandra are evergreen all winter long and I am reminded that we are now trimming up the pachysandra pots after the new spring growth spurt. This makes them more branched and more shorter. We no longer get complaints about them being too tall with the exception of one of our big gallon pachysandra purchasers who wants a big floppy plant so that when they plant it and mulch it there is a big green clump showing. These are things learned by our sales staff making Fall customer calls delivering boxes of Michigan apples and good cheer. At least they are told to exude good cheer after getting up at four in the morning and driving for three hours to find our customers. Anyhow, you can just give us a call any time to inform us of your trimming preferences. We have no idea what or why anyone would want anything done past us growing plants with lots of roots.

If you can handle a herbaceous groundcover then I really like *Chelone* 'Hot Lips' which makes a very thick deep green foliage with deep pink blooms in the summer. In the Fall this plant can be dealt with by mowing it off once the foliage turns brown. We have a large bed and so can do lots of cuttings in early spring. It is an underutilized and apparently not a well-known plant. It could be that the common name of 'turtlehead' discourages the timid from experimenting. That name is a description of

the bloom shape. The casual observer is not threatened by the shape of the blooms and appreciates the deep pink color.

Keep in mind our large supply of alliums. We have all the standard varieties and can do whatever we can find or get patent licenses to grow. This is the near ideal plant for us wholesale growers as it overwinters above ground in pots without protection, it does not need to be trimmed from over-growing, it can be propagated any time of the year, and it is easy. I am hoping that only landscapers, and not our fellow wholesale growers, are the people who read this mis-sive. I have spent half of my life waiting for a plant of such sterling characteristics to appear.

Speaking of large supply, as I understand it our complete inventory is kept current and is posted on our website. I would have no idea from any personal experience as I am unaware of how computers work. I hear rumors that they are delicate and tricky things and thus one does not want to start randomly pushing buttons on them and also in times of frustration one is not supposed to attack them with hammers. The IT people at the nursery keep reminding me of this latter fact as they suspect my memory to be fallible. When I first heard rumors about this inventory information being available to all potential customers I was happy. And then I started thinking about this inventory number being incomplete as it only includes plants that are ready to ship out that minute and gives no hint at all about what plants are in the pipeline and almost ready to ship. Thus, if a landscaper has, for an example, the time and inclination to plan ahead and look to see if we will have a specific product ready to ship they will get warped information that will cause us to miss a sale. Without the computer and planning ahead the customer would call one of our skilled customer service people (heretofore called sales personages) and inquire and thus get projected availability numbers. You can only imagine my thoughts about spending all of that money on the computer and then the software and then the inventory people who walk around making decisions on which plants are shippable and then getting everything entered and then finding out that I am losing sales because of trying so hard to get good information to our customers. My only hope is that there is either therapy or pills to treat this problem.

When you are coming to visit, tour our display garden, explain to our sales personages how they can do a better job, check to see if we are really the size I claim that we are, see in person if senility is not creeping up, whatever, if seeking reassurances would make you feel better, you will note that the new north-south freeway U.S. 31 has been completed, it runs from Indianapolis to Holland, Michigan. The hold up for 22 years was a prairie fen was in the way with Mitchell's satyr butterfly in it. They say that *Neonympha mitchellii mitchellii* is very rare and thus endangered. I think that the fact that it is small, brown, and lives for one or two weeks out of the year may make it rare to find rather than rare and endangered, but we do not want to digress into political comments, regardless of the temptations, because we want to sell plants and will smile and not argue with anyone as long as their money is green.

Now then, here is some advance notice that we may have some wild native violets for sale in late summer. From anything that I can learn, we should have been growing these fine plants as groundcovers for years. No one told us and we could not figure it out on our own but now we have a couple of large custom grows—*Viola labradorica* Alpine violet or Dog violet, and *Viola pedatifida* Prairie violet. This little story indicates that we will cheerfully take on a large order for an unfamiliar plant and that we hope to learn enough from this venture to bring value to our customers. We will keep you posted if we got a good take and have enough. We are aiming at a good cushion so as to fill the orders. In reading up on these completely unknown plants I note that Wikipedia says that "The plant sold as *Viola labradorica* by nurseries is really *Viola riviniana*." I hope that we did not get snookered again by someone selling us a mis-labelled plant and because of the aforementioned "too many witnesses" I will inform you of the truth whenever we figure it out.

You may notice that we have dropped the old standby seedling varieties Lavendar 'Hidcote' and 'Munstead', replacing them with the patented *augustifolia* 'SuperBlue' (PP#24,929) which came out of Darwin Perennials and is a better performer in the landscape. In late summer I will write up our experience with field grown lavenders as I planted several 300' long rows in heavy soil for Dianne's cutting

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garden. You may notice that I spend quite a bit of time trying to get back in her good graces. Try to not spend a lot of time worrying about why.

The alert student of our pricelist will notice that we have added back one of the tall grass prairie grasses—*Sorghastrum nutans* Golden Sunset® ('MNYG318153' PP#33,776) and there is a reason for the change in the common name to Yellow Prairie Grass. It is because the old original common name, and I quote: “indicates lack of understanding, awareness, and can continue to perpetuate bigotry”. I copied that quote fair and square from a University of Minnesota website called Grass Talk and “What’s in a name.” The person who made this selection and also the name change is Mary Hockenberry Meyer who also selected the very good *Schizachyrium scoparium* Blue Heaven® ('MinnblueA' PP#17,310) which we have been growing. It appears that these were selections made from a large seedling expanse and are thus nativars and not cultivars. They tell me that this makes a difference to some people somewhere and so I await further enlightenment. These are really good grass selections and as I have mentioned half a dozen times, we are in this business to

make money, so if someone wants a name change, they are going to get the name change. We are not even going to whine about the weather people no longer mentioning Indian Summer—only worry about making money.

Speaking of good plant selections, we are licensed also as one of Intrinsic Perennials propagators. Their new catalog is only on line [www.intrinsicperennialgardens.com](http://www.intrinsicperennialgardens.com) and it is worth looking at. For a while we offered their improved Penstemon “Pocahontas” patented which I liked a lot as greatly improved over the cheap seed grown ‘Husker Red’ but it did not sell and we dropped it. With very little encouragement we will offer it again.

That is about it. Things are changing out there and we are trying to keep up. That is all I wanted to say and now I wonder why it took me six pages to do it.

*Tom Kruegel*



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