

LEALETTE

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While I do not want to burden you with what it is like getting older, there are a few things about it that deserve mention. First of all it was a complete surprise to me that one day I woke up and was older—it was unanticipated. If I had known I was going to live this long and meet the same people throughout my business career I would have been nicer. A downside is that our contemporaries are starting to fall by the wayside. I was particularly struck by Peter Orum’s passing. He was a long-time friend and Dianne and I used to visit Peter and Irma every winter for a day of talking shop and visiting. When my parents started Twixwood, Midwest was our largest customer for about the first fifteen years. Peter was a good example to us. He invited me into the International Plant Propagator’s Society which has greatly enriched our personal and professional lives. I prize my Fellow Award from IPPS above all other degrees and memberships. Peter’s self-discipline and even temperament were a good example to us. His long-time professional association with and loyalty to Johnny Wilde was an object lesson to his brilliance as few others appreciated Johnny’s intelligence. Irma and Peter will be missed by Dianne and me. Our lives are the better for their acquaintance.

And now on to talking shop, sometimes the best analogy for the nursery business is the old Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown, Lucy, and Peppermint Patty are standing out in the baseball field and Lucy says: “We may not get much baseball played but we have some interesting discussions.”

Our current discussion is deciding how much Vinca minor ‘Bowles’ to make in the 2.5” SVD plastic pot. The British call it Vinca minor ‘La Grave’, same difference. Here at the nursery, one faction in this knock-down drag-out high-level discussion says that we should look only at the last five years’ sales history. I say that we should attempt to factor in how much we could have sold if we had had a good supply available at all times so that we never ever missed a sale. Sales history is irrelevant if we lost sales because of shortage of product. And then there is the more subtle factor, which is making the guess of how good our market would have been if we had a reputation for never running short of really good product. Therefore, we are dealing with what the customers want, or wanted over the years, and then how much sales was lost because of inadequate production, and then what the customers think about our reliability as a supplier so that they make the inquiry every time they need some.

For years we had great difficulty growing vinca. Mostly it was growing (or rooting) from a stem cutting under intermittent mist in the heat of summer. I have now completely figured out the formula for propagating unlimited amounts of the plant successfully, cheaply and at the time of the year that works with our employee schedule. Anyone who is a member of the International Plant Propagators Society is invited to come over, take a look, and get told the truth. The motto of IPPS is “To Seek and To Share” and we do that. The only problem with coming up with a really good idea and inventing something of value is that after the warm glow of success begins to fade as soon as I get to thinking how rich

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I would be if I had figured it out sooner in life—and then I feel really bad. The psychological satisfaction is missing here somewhere.

It used to be with vinca that we had a poor take in the summer, and then we had a lot of black stem rot in the spring caused by *Phoma exigua*, stem blight. A quick Google shows that the University of Massachusetts says to drench with: Cleary's 3336, or mancozeb (Protect T/O), or Pageant, or copper (Champ). We use Pristine, which is the name for the general agricultural use for Pageant. Many years ago I spotted Vinca minor Dart's Blue over in the Netherlands at Darthuizen Nursery, imported some, and then sold a whole lot to Midwest Groundcovers so we could do a joint introduction of this fine plant. It is very similar to the 'Bowles' but the Darthuizen people told me their variety was greatly resistant to black stem rot. And so now there is a confluence of reasons for why we can produce this plant reliably. Because half of my life was spent trying to solve the vinca production problem, now that it is so easy to make, I cannot help but produce several thousand flats too many every year—both trying to make up for the past and for plain old psychic satisfaction. Hence the source of many discussions.

Our only outside sales personage, Steve Raczak who has the greater Chicagoland area, is the real person who talks to other real people and thus is able to bring me direct feedback information. He says that I caused some confusion in the last Leaflet when I was going through all of the sizes of cells, pots, plugs or whatever the government requires us to provide volumes for in the sales catalog. And so I had started out attempting to do the volume comparisons based on my theory that soil volume equals root volume and thus plant quality.

If you look at page 84 in the 2024 Wholesale List (catalogue) you will note two things. The most important is that we did not have our trained and experienced computer person doing the lay out work for this page. Thus the tray photos are too black and nearly useless as a source of knowledge about the various paks we grow in. F is the 24ct Standard Flat made by Landmark Plastics out of Ohio which I went over in great detail about its history source and whatever eventually concluding that this was the flat that Midwest Groundcovers has used for its entire life. Because the insert that had the 24 nominally 3" cells in it

was more or less one unit, the Legal Volume was given for the entire flat and so I could not easily figure out the individual cell volume until I divided 5.49 liters by 24 and got 230 mL per cell. This compares to the volume for our 2 ½" SVD plastic pot which is 250 mL because it is one inch deeper than the Midwest cell.

While going through all of this volume business I was reminded that our pricing for the same flat of pachysandra was several dollars more than Midwest's price. I assumed that this information was not a secret as it is published in black and white in our respective catalogs. And so, to compensate for us being at a significantly higher cost than Midwest I decided to make the most of it by using the great disparity in pricing to show that we were not colluding in pricing. Price collusion is against the law, so our price for the pachysandra showed that we were all very legal.

That was far too complex to explain easily or fully and so some people were confused. Even if they understood what was going on they would be greatly confused by my mentioning in print that Midwest gave a better price than we did. And so Steve Raczak earns his keep by explaining to our customer base something about me having a warped sense of humor. I think that it shows a great deal of self-confidence on my part. Try to not over-think that bit of information.

I always ask our sales personages (so called because it is illegal these days to refer to them as 'sales girls') what to put into these news letters. They usually flee from that task for fear of being tarred with the same brush as myself. But this time one suggested that it would be helpful if our customer base informs them of which three plants they would like to see us grow that we do not already grow. That is a great idea as everyone has slack time in the winter and can use that time wisely thinking and analyzing and communicating. There may be some rational reasons for why we grow what we do, and, then again it may be purely accidental. As I have mentioned a number of times we, here as a wholesale nursery, have very little taste. We are in the business to make some money and as I get closer to the golden years I am able to overlook the aesthetics of plants, which should be a real selling feature for our business.

While you are busily spending the winter thinking about which plants you would like a reliable supplier for, you can also be thinking about which liners and in which size—deep fifties, 38 plugs, or 3 ½"

eighteens—you would prefer. Perennial liner plugs are usually transplanted into a one gallon (nominal) pot. Sometimes they are planted directly in the ground, a very rational idea. Of interest is the fact that our target customer—the landscape installer or re-wholesale yard that sells to the landscape installer person—is usually not the container grower person and so that is an entirely different customer base that we are trying to break into. I am told that this is not that much of a problem because most of the perennial liner sales are made by reps and brokers and delivery is by common carriers on disposable racks. All of which allows us to market to a different customer than the landscaper we usually cater to.

The reason for making this distinction is because we have mostly repeat business and to those local enough for us to truck deliver to. We have spent years building up business relationships, all of which involve honesty, ethics, and trust, and so those are the customers we depend on. We found out all about this about twenty years ago when we tried to break into the green roof business. Green roofs involved really heavy and big trays of gravel with sedums growing in them that were installed by roofers on the tops of sky scrapers. These were neither normal people nor our normal customer base and so we flailed around for a while until the market matured, the technical installations became rationalized, and we were competing with the big boys. It was fun for a while. A very strange business that is intrinsically irrational, expensive, and irrelevant. These days we are out of it completely.

I am now becoming a student of lavender. I have eight double planted rows planted out in a flower garden that I have planted for my wife, given my ongoing attempt to get back in her good graces. Every so often some wag suggests that I figure out what I did to get out of her good graces and work on that personal deficiency. I find it easier, as well as more psychologically satisfying, to just plant more flowers.

We used to grow a lot of *L. Munstead* from seed and do so no longer. I consider that to be an inferior plant. We now do two of the new improved patented ones. *Lavendula augustifolia* ‘SuperBlue’ PP#24,929 is interesting and mostly because it is the ideal landscape plant. It is unlike the traditional lavenders in that it is short and has short scapes with short flower blooms on them. Therefore it is not something good for handfuls of long aromatic

cuttings which are good for bouquets and for drying. It literally blooms all summer long—here in the banana belt of Michigan even into mid-November—with a nice dark blue/lavender color and it never needs trimming.

The other new strain is *Lavendula x intermedia* ‘Niko’ PP#24,193 PHENOMENAL®. This has really long scapes with more of a light blue delicate color. Blooms are harvested by the large handfuls, being easy to gather and snip off with shears. Historically, I have grown the *L. Hidcote* from cuttings although I forget where I got the original plants from. *Hidcote* is sold as a seedling, but we have maintained the cutting grown plants. These have a nice medium long scape with dark purple blooms with long flowers and a very nice lavender smell.

As mentioned, we have these nice 200’ long rows planted into some worn out clay soil and they are doing fantastic. I always thought that lavender liked sandy well drained soil and this does not appear to be the problem. I read once that a high Ph is preferred and important. Also, only trim them after they have just started growing in the spring.

This brings up the sensitive subject of patented perennials and also the Proven Winners® patented, branded, and well-advertised line of plants. As a student of the horticultural business because I am dependent on it for a happy declining years existence—my children have informed me that they are not going to change my diapers and so I will need to be self-sufficient in that area, hence making some money, I am always looking for the competitive advantage that Twixwood has to offer. I used to brag about us always having the improved varieties (cultivars) of plants—*Vinca minor* ‘Bowles’, *Pachysandra terminalis* ‘Green Carpet’, *Hedera helix* ‘Thorndale’, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia* ‘Englemanni’, and now we are searching everywhere for the true strain of *Waldsteinia fragarioides* to replace the common *W. ternata*. We are trying to get the native variety, also known as *Geum fragarioides*.

In growing these millions of groundcover plants our competitive edge is our large, trained, and skilled labor force along with our being psychologically capable of dealing with the concomitant large payroll that comes with a labor-intensive business. I have even learned to be really nice to our employees. It has helped that my wife is naturally nice to them.

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And so now our competitive advantage is in growing whichever plant varieties the market wants while being very good at the delivery service. Our trucks are in the Chicago, Detroit, Traverse City, and Indianapolis areas several times a week delivering to yards and job sites. It is the being able to deliver this new and wide variety of plant material that is our current competitive advantage. The trick now is to always have a good supply of plants on hand all season long. We understand how that is done. It is all based on having enough square feet of propagation, over-wintering, shade-protected growing areas and structures. To use the passive tense, hints have been given that if I put up any more poly houses I will be going to marriage counseling. Do not worry, I will keep you well informed of every step along this path. We are patiently waiting for the right signal before starting the next big nursery expansion.

As for some of our new plant offerings, we have a new ajuga—Ajuga Midnight Mystery™ PP#33,969 out of the old Blooms of Bressingham in the UK. We are a licensed propagator and rapidly building stock. We also have two new big bluestem grasses, out of Intrinsic Gardens—*Dancing Wind* PP#26,892 and *Holy Smoke* PP#33,929. We have several new little bluestems—from seed collected in Missouri by Piet Oudolf and Cassian Schmidt we offer *Ha Ha Tonka* PP# 32,374. It is hairy and fuzzy, and for some reason people absolutely love it. The two other little bluestems are from Intrinsic, *Little Red Fox* PPAF and *Sandhill* PPAF.

In this last year our number one, in sales, genus, which used to be Pachysandra, is now the Carexes. We know how to produce a million plugs a year, which can be easily expandable. We want to credit Roy Diblik from Northwind for incessantly preaching about the wonders of carex as a substitution for pachysandra—it is a native, likes shade, and does not need any care. I will take the credit for believing him, which is easy to do having done business with him since he worked at Natural Gardens back in both of our youths.

For 2025 the Perennial Plant of the Year® is Pycnanthemum muticum (Mountain Mint) we have a great supply of liners and gallon containers. I am not responsible for the aesthetics of this plant. Some people think that the perennial plant people put a great deal of thought into promoting the best look-

ing plants possible. And then the realists think that this is a very good marketing ploy that will ensure the long-term financial success of perennial growers. We fall into the latter category with the proviso that at this stage in our lives short-term success will be sufficient. It appears to be an enthusiastic plant.

Our sales staff, the people who are on the phone with customers all of the time and who go around visiting as many customers as possible in the fall and who want to be loved, have requested that I not express my heart-felt opinions about native plants or native plant people or the butterflies and worms that feed on native plants that are purportedly to be beneficial us humans peoples. And, even more specifically, I should not accuse anyone of virtue signaling. It appears that the sales staff people know that I know that they know they are of critical importance to my business because they have had to learn about computers and plants and our customer people, all the while acting happy and cheerful and accommodating. The original mistake was in hiring intelligent people for that job. Clearly I was kept out of the recruiting and interviewing process. It is too late to do anything about it now.

And so I will, instead, mention that we did two large custom grow jobs in 2024 for the Detroit area that involved significant native plants—one for a large private foundation and the other for the Gordie Howe Bridge that goes from America to Canada and would have been packed with moving vans after the last election if bridge had been finished in time. The lessons for our customer base, besides the well-established one which is that we do not suffer from good taste, is that we will do large custom grows and that we have recent experience in successfully growing many native plants. We sourced and bought in most of the liners as we did not have our own cutting beds established. We are going to get ahead of this in the future. The other problem with native plants is that the purists grow them only from seeds, with those being collected from the right provenance. We have a seed chamber and have experience growing some of the cheaper perennials from seed, but I consider any seeding to be cheating because it is too easy. Real men take and root cuttings under intermittent mist.

Here are a few of the plant varieties that we grew. A woody shrub for stream banks is Xanthorrhiza simplicissima, yellow root. Eurybia divaricate, white wood aster, native to the Eastern US. Sym-

phyotrichum cordifolium, blue wood aster, likewise a native. On that same job we grew *Anemone sylvestris*, a dry woods perennial native to Western Europe and *Sesleria autumnalis*, native to Western Asia. They tell me it is cheating to point out that every plant is a native of somewhere. We also grew *Callirhoe involucrate*, purple poppy mallow or winecup, a gaudy prairie plant that is long blooming and enthusiastic. It puts out long horizontal stems that get all tangled up with the plants grown around it. *Monarda fistulosa* is the native prairie version with a pale blue flower. *Penstemon digitalis* is the Foxglove beardtongue, again a prairie plant. *Stylophorum diphyllum* is the woodland wood poppy or Celandine poppy, a bright blooming plant.

The more interesting and potentially good groundcover plants are *Viola labradorica* or Labrador Violet a nice purple leafed plant. And then there was something called *Viola pedatifida*, Larkspur violet or Prairie violet, and you can get seed for that plant at a cost of \$1,300 a pound. We do not know everything there is to know about these native violets except that there are some thirty varieties that hybridize with promiscuity so there is never anything true to name available. There is a rumor going around that they will die if over-wintered in a gallon pot. We do not know about that yet. Of course we are over-wintering most of these plants because the contractors have no control over when they can plant and the jobs are seldom ready on time. We explained that potential problem when taking on the job but were reassured that this job was different. If anything lives through the winter and these look attractive we may add them to our listings. Always looking for more good groundcovers.

While on the subject of groundcovers I need to warn everyone about a really bad and invasive plant with the harmless sounding name of Indian Strawberry, Latin name: *Duchesnia indica*. It is Indian alright, a native of the foot hills of the Himalayas over in northern India and when the birds eat its drupes it is seeded all over and impossible to eradicate. I could go on. Do not ask me how I know all these things.

Therefore and in conclusion we are beginning to grow natives. We are going to act happy about doing so. And we do large custom grows. Besides bringing valuable information to our customers in these newsletter things, I like to make some money here and there. To make money I want to unload some

Bouteloua gracilis 'Blonde Ambition' PP#22,048 upon the unsuspecting. This is a near perfect perennial grass—it is tall with dramatically golden seed heads, it is easy to propagate and fast to grow. We have 6,000 gallon pots of it and 8,000 2 1/2" liners in the SVD size plastic pot. The "near-perfect" title is because it dies in the winter under most circumstances, thus causing more buying from us. Let us know this winter if you foresee a market for more than these and we will make them.

Another native that we have a great many of due to that deadly combination of optimism and ignorance is *Parthenocissus quinquefolia* 'Engelmannii'. Years ago we used to be in the vine business, mostly because we were making about a hundred thousand clematis one gallon pots that we sold to mass merchandisers. After dropping any box stores, we dropped all of the vines. I find it interesting that some plants only sell through mail order—these are clematis and peonies—or maybe a few through garden centers. These days we sell, or more precisely, market to the landscaper people. This is a business model that I changed to after dropping our big box store customer.

I heard a rumor last winter that one of our Midwestern states had enough money to plant vines on the sound walls along their toll road highways. I forgot if mention was made of how many miles of these sound walls was involved. Maybe I was not listening as I was adding up potential earnings instead of listening—the contracts have not been coming and so now we have 10,000 gallons over-wintering outside and 25,000 3 1/2" pots of liners getting ready to grow in the early spring, inside. There is a reason for everything, although not always a good reason. Someone on the internet who is more poetic than honest has written about 'Engelmannii': "This delightful version of the eastern United States native Virginia creeper vine features smaller leaves and a somewhat less vigorous habit. Reaching 25'-40' and featuring pretty, deep-green leaves made up of five small leaflets." It goes on about attaching to walls with suckers and a distinct bronzy-red fall color and can be used as a groundcover with some pruning necessary to keep it in bounds.

The people I pay to keep track of inventory, make up the production schedules, study past sales history, and make wild guesses about the market to come, do not make the mistakes that I do and mostly

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because I get to keep my job no matter how much off I am in my optimistic dreams. They do not think they have that luxury. Their problem is finding enough poly house space to over-winter the plants. They want to maintain our reputation for having a continuous supply of our main product lines.

Thus here is what we have potted up for sale next year. Predictions are not precise and so some may not be ready until 2026, it gives you some idea of what we can do. And keep in mind that we are potting continuously and what we make in May and June will be saleable by September. These are in the #1, nominally one gallon, pot.

70,000 Carex pensylvanica
50,000 Vinca minor 'Bowles'
44,000 Sporobolus heterolepis
40,000 Sesleria autumnalis
30,000 Liriope spicata
25,000 Calamagrostis 'Karl Foerster'
25,000 Pachysandra t. 'Green Carpet'
20,000 Allium 'Summer Beauty'
20,000 Nepeta 'Walker's Low'
20,000 Liriope muscari 'Big Blue'

17,000 Pennisetum a. 'Hameln'
15,000 Allium 'Millenium'
14,000 Schizachyrium scoparium
14,000 Sporobolus h. 'Tara'
13,000 Geranium sang. 'Max Frei'
13,000 Liriope Muscari 'Var.'
12,000 Panicum v. 'Shenandoah'
12,000 Echinacea purp. 'Magnus Superior'
12,000 Amsonia 'Blue Ice'
12,000 Coreopsis v. 'Zagreb'
11,000 Rudbeckia f. 'Goldsturm'
11,000 Geranium Rozanne® (GerWat)
10,000 Rudbeckia 'American Gold Rush' PP#28498
10,000 Calamintha nepeta 'Montrose White'
10,000 Hakonechloa m. 'All Gold'
8,000 Perovskia a. 'Little Spire'
8,000 nepeta 'Cat's Pajamas' PP#31,127 PW®
8,000 Lavandula aug. 'SuperBlue' PP#24,929
8,000 Carex 'Ice Dance'
8,000 Asclepias tuberosa

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