

Propagating in The Information Age: Does Our Nomenclature Provide Enough Information?

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Do your customers really know what they are buying? Are we doing a good enough job of describing our products? Are there opportunities awaiting those who better educate their customers, thereby building loyalty and increasing value?

First we'll discuss problems with the prevailing nomenclature and catalog description practices. In the perennial trade it seems that nearly everyone grows *Penstemon* 'Husker Red'. For the first few years after we acquired the plant, we propagated it vegetatively and everyone was happy. I then found out from a customer that most growers were growing theirs from seed, as the lovely seed flats they sold me testified, they were doing fine from seed, as the plants had consistent good deep red color. All went swimmingly for a few more years until our seed batches became inconsistent. We had to "rogue" the seedlings out, but the results were more inconsistent than we would like. As of this year, we're growing them vegetatively, letting our customers know that, charging more for a superior product, and differentiating ourselves in the marketplace. This gives you and your customers "bragging rights", they know they're getting the genuine article. Casting doubt on others undifferentiated products is just an unanticipated positive consequence.

Other problems come in where a given plant has a very wide native range, covering several climate zones. I remember well hearing J.C. Raulston give a talk entitled "The Importance of Provenance" at the native plants conference in Cullowhee, North Carolina. He used *Acer rubrum* as an illustration. It grows from Florida to Maine. If you just list as *A. rubrum*, does a distant customer have the information to make an intelligent decision? Will a plant from Alabama thrive in Massachusetts? All I'm suggesting is that we list the information and let our customers make up their minds. You know the old expression "no one has ever lost a dime underestimating the taste (intelligence?) of the American people. Well that may hold some water, but I would rather have a business that operates on the other end of the spectrum and recognizes and appreciates an increasingly sophisticated market.

I also think that other anecdotal information helps one's catalog and hence helps the business distinguish itself. When the full story of the origin of a selected plant is told, several good things are set in motion. The customer learns more from you than from your competitors, you and your business are looked upon in a more favorable light as more authoritative and knowledgeable, and the person who introduced the plant is recognized. This is often a great thrill and a trust builder. Does it do me any good to pretend that *Aster novae-angliae* 'Purple Dome' was a North Creek introduction? Even though we were the first to have it, I think that we're much better off telling the customers that it was a Mt. Cuba introduction. That's good company to keep and Dr. Lighty was also happy to get us early divisions of a few other introductions as well. When we create and tell stories about plants we are adding something extremely valuable to the product-information, knowledge, and goodwill. When I visited Coen Jansen, a Dutch plant breeder and small retailer and showed him my catalog, listing him as the source for *Nepeta grandiflora* 'Dawn

to Dusk', he treated me like a king! I had published him in North America! He promptly gave me several more new goodies that we hope will be introductions in the future.

Most all other trades describe their products much more fully. Imagine all of the available info for a car, computer, or house. These markets grow in part because they are constantly innovating, describing those innovations, and setting themselves apart. So I believe that developing more "intellectual capital" is a part of the maturation of our industry.

There is a growing market for "green" lumber that is not harvested from old growth forests, an exploding market for organic and whole foods, both developments that I applaud. The reason that they get more for their products is that they enumerate the differences and appeal to the intelligence and desires of their customers.

Several segments of the market are demanding more information. Lots of ecologically minded landscape architects are specifying regional plant provenances that are also open pollinated. This market is not for everybody and it's tricky, but what's the harm in them specifying your material? By giving out a bit of info, you can occasionally be the supplier of choice!

We at North Creek have developed our own little codes to give out the genetic information about the plants that we offer — not necessarily exactly how we propagate them.

- **VEG.** This is a true cultivar. A single selected plant named and propagated vegetatively. All plants are genetically identical (hopefully). These we do from cuttings or divisions.
- **SCL.** A code we made up. We wanted to distinguish between identical plants—genetically—and a very similar populations that do have some variability. A seed cultivar is either a deliberately bred and commercially available cultivar like *Echinacea purpurea* 'White Swan' or a true-from-seed cultivar with distinct differences from the species, like *Aquilegia canadensis* 'Corbett'. These plants have consistent ornamental characteristics with a bit of individual variability. Both the "veg" and the "scl" are cultivars in taxonomic terms, but nonetheless, very different animals.
- **OP.** This is a plant that is open pollinated, and quite genetically variable (variety is the spice of life). I prefer to list it as "OP" rather than say seed propagated because I may need to make 2000 out of 1000 by cutting or divisions, after all a propagator always needs access to his full bag of tricks.
- **TC.** A plant propagated by tissue culture. At this point, we don't use this in our catalog, but we will when we add more "TC" crops. A funny things happen — have you seen those advertisements that offer *Hemerocallis* 'Happy Returns' and mention specifically not "TC" produced!, i.e. have not mixed up the true plant. I know that this might not make the "TC" producers happy, but for better or worse, at least at this early stage in the development of the technology, there have been problems and variability, particularly in *Hemerocallis* and *Hosta*. Indeed, with *Hosta*, "TC" is often the source of the variation that leads to new cultivars.

These symbols are just my suggestion, but they're simple and convey a lot of valuable information. I recognize that not all nurseries will feel that this system is for them. It is particularly valuable for those of us in the starter business. With provenance, listing that information will be more helpful to a regional than a national grower. I think that we have to remember that our goal is for our plants to succeed in gardens and landscapes, giving the ultimate customer a successful experience. Just selling plants that look good in the container, but will not necessarily be well adapted in the customers region is a pyrrhic victory, making profits now but perhaps not sowing the best seeds for the future.

It would also be helpful if all new introductions would be registered listing propagation info so propagators like myself will know how to propagate it. I know that it takes time, and I must admit that we've named three cultivars and have not registered them. Even our esteemed former Executive Secretary Darrel "The Good Dr." Apps confessed in a moment of weakness that he had introduced a named form of *Astilbe* and not gotten around to registering it, considering it just a perennial and not a *Hemerocallis*, with which he has assiduously registered.

Finally, I think that the International Plant Propagators Society is the best place to have this discussion, and look forward to your comments.