

Greenhouse[®]

MANAGEMENT PRODUCTION

Incredible Edibles

Agri-Starts
boosts its production with
container-grown fruit p. 10

Ty Strode

BLUEBERRY

518

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ON THE COVER

Ty Strode, Agri-Starts director of marketing, expects container-grown edibles to become a major part of the company's tissue culture production. See page 10.

Photo by David Kuack

COVER STORY

10 Incredible edibles

Agri-Starts is known for propagating foliage, but the 26-year-old company found that edible plants provide an avenue for increased profits. Agri-Starts is supplying plugs for containerized edibles sold in garden centers.



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BY CHRIS BERG

WEIRD PLANTS

that sell

These plants are unusual enough to create interest among consumers and mainstream enough to make growers and retailers some money

When you hear the term "weird or unusual plants" what comes to mind? Do you think of those bizarre botanicals that are more likely to appear in an issue of National Geographic than seasonal mail-order catalogs? Some of the more unusual plants you're not likely to

see in your neighborhood garden center include: corpse flower (*Amorphophallus titanum*), which has a smell like rotting meat; giant gunnera (*Gunnera manicata*) with the world's largest leaves; or plants with distinctive parts like the nipple fruit (*Solanum mammosum*).

Rethinking this concept of weird or unusual plants reminded me of a conversation I had with one of my mentors

very early in my career. Walking through some plant trials with PanAmerican Seed breeder Blair Winner, he was showing me his latest creations including some rather odd ones. He asked me, "Do you like this?" I told him I did. He then asked me, "Would you buy this?" After pausing a moment, I answered, "Probably not."

That was a pivotal conversation during which I realized that as a plant geek it's fun to grow some of these novelty plants in my own garden. However, it's my professional role to find fun plants that will have commercial acceptance by consumer, grower and retailer.

I consider the following plants to be ones that are unusual enough to create interest among consumers and mainstream enough to make growers and retailers some money along the way.

Aloe variegata Gator

Get it? Alogator. Not your typical, old-fashioned *Aloe vera* that consumers are used to seeing in mid-summer to cure that afternoon sans sunscreen. Gator sports a very unique, reptilelike color pattern on the leaves. Its habit is also unique with a tight triangular plant that keeps growing upward, stacking triads of leaves, one over the next. Once established, Gator sends out numerous pups around the perimeter, filling the container it's in. This is a must-have plant for rock gardens and patio containers.

Petunia hybrida Black Velvet, Supertunia Pretty Much Picasso

Are petunias really unique plants? They can be. In the last two years, the industry has had two rather remarkable introductions that are not only completely innovative to the genus, but have excellent retail potential.

Supertunia Pretty Much Picasso from Proven Winners has had a full year at the retail level with huge success.



Left: *Aloe variegata* Gator, Right: Black Velvet and Supertunia Pretty Much Picasso petunias



Above: *Acer palmatum* Ryusen, Top right: *Roscoea* Spice Island
Bottom right: *Portulaca molokiniensis* Maraca



While it may not have the overall flower power of others in the series, the unique chartreuse on violet has been an indisputable hit among female consumers.

This year Black Velvet was introduced by Ball FloraPlant. What doesn't look good with black? This striking introduction will certainly make a bold statement in a retail display. It will also make a dramatic presentation mixed in combination containers with contrasting companion plants.

Acer palmatum Ryusen

If you're a plant enthusiast, then ItSaul Plants is a nursery you should visit. Like Bobby Saul, each of his introductions has something truly unique and quirky to offer. This new Japanese maple is the first weeping variety with palmate

leaves on the market.

The adaptable plant can be trained up to 20 feet tall. You can train the plant to your desired height and then just let it cascade from there. Alternatively, the plant could be trained along the edge of a wall and allowed to drape down. Fall foliage is a beautiful orange-red.

Roscoea Spice Island

From another one of the industry's best plant geeks, Dan Heims at Terra Nova Nurseries, comes a new hardy ginger for perennial gardens. Spice Island has dense clumps of dark leaves and showy, thick, deep-red stems. Its bright-purple, orchid-like flowers appear in mid-summer.

Roscoea grows best in a cool woodland location, either in the ground or in

containers. It is hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 6-9.

Portulaca molokiniensis Maraca

Maraca is a recent succulent introduction from EuroAmerican Propagators. It has a peculiar habit. It produces vertical stems with tightly packed whorls of frosty green foliage. It can be used as specimen in large containers or as a landscape plant. In late summer Maraca produces bright-yellow, waxy flowers at the tip of each stem.

Dyckia hybrid 'Burgundy Ice'

'Burgundy Ice' has rich burgundy leaves with silver spines that are real attention grabbers. Beautiful from a distance, but don't try to touch it. It can be planted in

the ground where it produces a dense, mounded rosette. I find it is much more striking in containers where the leaves can freely arch over the edge.

Kalanchoe synsepala Gremlin

This new succulent from EuroAmerican Propagators has bright, lime-green leaves with scalloped, burgundy margins. The real showstoppers are the numerous little Gizmos that protrude from the center of the plant on long wiry stems. Fun to use in containers and hanging baskets, where the pups bounce in the wind.

Ptilotus hybrid Platinum Wallaby

Platinum Wallaby is a fun and unusual plant for waterwise gardening. It is a different species than Joey from Benary, which opened up this genus to the industry. Platinum Wallaby is a perennial plant living about three years in appropriate climates.



Top: *Kalanchoe synsepala* Gremlin. Top right: *Ptilotus* hybrid Platinum Wallaby. Bottom right: *Dyckia* hybrid 'Burgundy Ice.'

Ptilotus is an Australian native that can take incredibly dry conditions once it is established. This plant never stops blooming, producing many large pink feathery flowers year-round in mild climates like in southern California. ♡

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