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Interview with Jack Williams

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Jack Williams

Well, what we're looking at are groups of plants that come to us from Australia, they're native to Australia but have been bred and improved so that their not quite as weedy as you might find in the outback itself, but now have commercial application. Now growing plants like this can be very simple, however, growers need to keep in mind some of the problems that would come up if they used these plants. We always think about where the plant came from and what those conditions mean to us as growers on how we produce them in a greenhouse for example, all of these Australian native plants have evolved in an area of the world where there is virtually no phosphorus in the soil. To me, the grower, that tells me that if I'm fertilizing with something that has a lot of phosphorous, I'm going to be doing something that is not normal for the plant and its actually going to suffer as a result, I may not get the best production. So for growers we have to use fertilizers that are low in phosphorous to help assure that these plants (cut off)

animals like kangaroos are out there on the country sides, they're chewing these plants, eating them and trimming them down to the nubs. That also tells me, the grower, that this is a plant that at some point needs to be trimmed back or pinched. That way it's going to branch out and continue to develop and stay compact-full and give us the kind of plant habit we find desirable in for use in the commercial market. This plant, if it was not pinched, would tend to grow very tall and weedy and fall out but because we have pinched it and treated it, much like the kangaroos do naturally, it's full, it's compact and it has an ideal form for use in the garden.

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Well, of course, Paul Ecke ranch is known and probably the most famous for our poinsettias crops, that's what we've been doing the longest, that's what most people know us for, but like any business we need to diversify and get involved in other things and we thought that the market for spring blooming plants and annuals was very very important. There were lots of seed products out there, but the vegetative market that we work in is fairly

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new and very dynamic, a lot of exciting stuff coming along. So by adding all of these vegetative products, we're providing good quality plant material into the market with outstanding garden performance. This means the gardeners having better luck, more exciting stuff to use in their own containers or their own gardens, and so just like we like to be on the forefront of the poinsettia breeding and developing, we're here on the forefront of what's happening on the vegetative market for spring and summer annuals.

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When we talk about vegetative market, that is simply that the plants are reproduced from cuttings that come from the mother plant. We know with seeds that seed is harvested, its sewn, it germinates, and it grows. The difference is that every seed is going to be a little bit different. Even though the seed companies select for uniformity of characteristics, each one is a unique individual. When we take cuttings from this plant, we can rest assured that when it is propagated and grown that a plant that results from this will look just like the mother plant it came from. And that allows us to do some very unique things. Many of these wonderful flowers with special characteristics are sterile and would never come through a seed program, but because we can reproduce it from cuttings, that allows us to take this interesting unique genetics from the market place and get it out there for the gardener to use and that's really a nice benefit.

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As horticulturists, we always worry about all the details of plant growth, about how the leaves are the right color, the flowers are the right color, the conditions are perfect. What we have to remember is that flowers are one the most important things we can do just to enhance people's lives, and these snap dragons are an example of that. As a horticulturist, I'm looking at plant structure and all the signs of it. But you know when I smell a snap dragon, I'm sitting on the porch with my great grandmother eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and its the emotion that takes me right back to that moment in time that I get every time I'm near this plant, so as beautiful as they are to us from a science standpoint they're even more beautiful in our lives and that kind of magic exists, I think, with everyone. Every plant, every flower, every scent has the opportunity to stimulate a memory. And

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that's what this is all about, making the most of your moments today and the memories might have.

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Helping these people out there in the market that are going to grow these plants understand how to do it. So it's part the science of it, it's also the communication of it, an education with the growers that we work with.

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Well we're working with some agents over there that help, again, vegetative production. They have our mother plants, they take the cuttings and provide those for growers in those regions of the country, so just like we have greenhouses all through here in North America and Europe, Asia has the same opportunity, flowers are very important and very valuable, so again our goal is to help those people be as successful as possible with the crops, make sure that they can grow them, get the best production quality out of them so they have the highest value in the market place. But again we're talking about growers who are not as familiar with these plants and so it's not as simple as just writing a book and sending it to them and saying here is how you grow it, you have to factor in the climate and the conditions that they're dealing with and so my role is to go work with those people in different parts of the world, whether it's Asia, Australia, Europe, the Caribbean, Alaska, wherever it is, and help them analyze the conditions that they're working under to maximize the growth of the plant for best success.

Well, the market, for example, the market in poinsettias and the spring plant material that we're involved in is similar if not larger in the European market than it is here in the North American market. You know, we always think of Europe as where gardeners really, you know, that's where they evolved from and everyone has window boxes and they have all of these wonderful gardens everywhere, well, that means plant and flower usage is so very important there. The newer markets like Asia and some of those areas are emerging markets and that's where people are learning to take their agricultural production facilities with very minor modifications, learn how to go from vegetables and food crops into ornamental flowers that have a different value in the market place. And so much smaller markets in those areas, that very young markets and ones that can grow, I mean, when

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I look at Asia, my pun is that I want a poinsettia in every pagoda. There is so many people that can be touched by flowers, again helping the growers that are there be successful in producing them means that they can start to expand that distribution to whatever level the market will permit, but they have to have good quality to do that first and foremost and that's not an accident, that's something that they have to learn and evolve into and part of what our role here is to help them with that. Help them develop.

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Well, we have two systems that we actually work with. Here in North America, it's the patent system, just like inventions and mechanics and other things are patented, plants are patented and recognized and protected by the U.S. Government. We have to submit applications and explain in detail about the plant, where it evolved from, how it was developed and how its characteristics are unique and different from other plants in the market. When that's recognized, the government issues a plant patent that then protects that plant so that the royalties and the money that are derived from those cuttings can be given back to the breeders to encourage that research and encourage further breeding. In other parts of the world, the more predominant system is one called plant breeder rights. That's where each of the countries, an application is submitted to, they will acknowledge that this is unique genetics that it is the result of the breeders work, and again, it is protected. It's very similar to our patent system, but a little bit more broad in its overall scope. Again, what it allows is that companies like ours can distribute these cuttings, we can include in our distribution charges a royalty which means money that goes directly back to the breeder to help fund their future research programs. I look at royalties as rent, you choose where you live, if you don't want to pay a lot to live, you're going to pick an area of town or an area of the country where the quality of life may not be as good. Royalty on a plant means that you're paying for a plant that has superior characteristics, yes, it adds to the cost of that but it means its going to perform better, last longer, be more vibrant in color, whatever those characteristics are, and again, it helps assure that those breeders are rewarded for their work and given a financial incentive to continue it, and as long as they do that, we'll have more and more wonderful plant material coming down the line for us to use.

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When we look at what it takes to get a plant to market, from let's say the first seedlings to where it's commercially viable, in the case of these plants that we're looking at, that may be a process of about five years. The breeder certainly sews the seeds, looks at the first genetics, looks to see what those seedlings come out to be, selects from it the things from it that are interesting, from there we have to see, number one, can that plant be replicated by cuttings, and that's very important to make sure that we can reproduce it and have it stay stable, or so every clone is the same. Next, we have to test it in the gardens, because you can have some beautiful plants, but if they don't perform well in the gardens out there, they have no value to us, to the consumers of our plants. So we test them in multiple locations throughout the country over multiple years, it's usually a two year process to make sure, whether it's a cold summer or an exceptionally hot summer, we see how that plant performs. Once we know that those are good plants, they are capable of being grown and used in gardens around the country, then the final process is building them up into production, cleaning them up to make sure all the viruses and diseases are not part of that so that they can be shipped as healthy cuttings and then put into the market. So that introduction phase may be five years from seed to cell.

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Well, for example, this year we are introducing sixty-seven new items. Last year, we introduced about sixty, and we're holding back, there's far more than that that we have available but some of them are in that additional testing phase, some of them we are trying to learn a few more things about them before we put them out in the market to make sure that we can help growers be successful with it. And some we just want to hold back because you don't throw away everything at one time, there may be a reason for us waiting on special colors or special form for next year, too many new things at one time is going to be confusing and unfortunately a lot of this will not even really be recognizable by people for another few years. With a new variety we may have 100,000 plants, well, 100,000 plants is nothing in the scheme of how many plants are sold nationwide. They are not going to get into the hands of every gardener. So it is a couple year buildup program as well, so we like that pipeline of fresh

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material coming in all the time. And hopefully it's there not only to put new genetics in, but to replace older, less productive or less valuable stuff.

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When we talk about some interesting stories about plants, one of the more interesting success stories I see here is Coleus. Now, Coleus is not a new plant, Coleus has been around for a long time and I think we all know it in some capacity. But we've introduced Coleus back into the market, this time cleaning it up, making sure the viruses aren't there. It's interesting that when first cleanup work was done, we found that many of these wonderful colors and characteristics actually went away because the virus was what was causing that so the process of cleaning them up actually yielded some pretty unremarkable plant material. But we have been able to come through with a series of plants that are cleaned and do not contain the plant viruses that we're concerned about that still have this wonderful textures and colors and characteristics to use. I think the saying is that everything old is new again, well, Coleus is one of those old plants that's been around forever, but everywhere I look I see it being used as displays, arboretums, botanic gardens, and going to be a wonderful addition for people to use again in their shade gardens with some nice, clean plant material.

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Things are done to try to help gardeners find the flower fields product. When you walk into retail, how do you know if you're buying the flower field product or just another one. For example, this dahlia, there are many dahlias in the marketplace, but how do you know it's the one in the program? All of the products are tagged, so you can find the information on the plant tag that goes along with the plant, and it will clearly have the flower field's logo and information there. But other tools are available, we have helped create a logo pot in a special color here that is connected to the purple that we use throughout the flower fields program, again, to help you gardeners find these plants very easily in the retail environment. Also, there are tools like our point of purchase materials, both posters and bench cards, other things that very clearly call out that it's a flower fields product and for retailers, this year we've provided a CD, and if they choose to, they can create all of these point of purchase materials in the retail environment and customize them to their own store. There are things that they can take down, it's a CD that we give them for free, they can go down to Kinko's,

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print out the posters, the bench cards, and they can actually insert their logo and (cut off)

and have part of the program, and again, that way, people can take advantage of knowing what flower fields is, what plants belong to that program, where they get it. These are things we help out with so that the grower can be more successful and the gardener can be successful finding the product to use in their environment.

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Why should they buy flower fields plants? Again, I think it's hard to communicate in just a few seconds, but we've tested these plants. We've really made sure that these have good garden performance under a wide range of conditions. The best performing plants aren't always what you just find everywhere. A lot of people bring plant material into the marketplace and they look very beautiful right then and there, but does it have the ability to go through the whole season or come back in the case of perennials or plants that are supposed to have multi-season performance. The only way you know that is if the breeders and the developers like yourself have taken time to trial it, evaluate it, make sure that you can put it in your garden with confidence. That's what brand programs like the flower fields are about. We've done that testing. You should be able to walk in and with confidence, know that this is what you're going to get. I kind of equate to, let's say, cereal. We all have our favorite types of cereal. Maybe we know that Kellogg's Special K, there's quality control behind that, the blend, the flakes aren't all broken up, there's a lot of things about it that you know you can count on versus that generic box of corn flakes. It truly is, you pay for what you get for, but you also have to know what you're looking for, so we try to make sure that when you buy a flower fields plant, you're getting what you pay for, you gotta make sure that you've got a plant that's been tested, has good quality, is healthy and number two, that you can find it and it's identified. And by being able to put those things together, you can create your own flower fields in your own garden.

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Mark Freeman

How long has the brand been around?

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Jack Williams

Well, the brand is actually a fairly new one. This is our third year in the marketplace identified as the flower fields. And right now, for people who are looking to find the product, if you go to our web site, which is theflowerfields.com, you can even go in and find retailers by putting in your zip code and it will help pull up all the retailers in your area that carry these plants. Now, not every retailer is registered yet, this is a fairly new database, but we're trying to find ways to connect gardeners with the product and they can do it by looking for the signs and the information of the retailer, they can go to the web site to try and get that information.