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Current Issue - No Special treatment for these new varieties (web exclusive)

Trials manager emphasizes the importance of providing plants with a true gardening experience

By Joel Ceausu

Noted Québec horticulturist Claude Vallée is not concerned some of his plants aren't doing so well on the day of my visit, but that's not what it seems.

Vallée is coordinator of the plant trials at the Jardin Daniel A. Séguin in Saint-Hyacinthe, at the campus of the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire (ITA). The gardens are named for the man who helped launch Québec's first college program in ornamental horticulture.

The gardens have been open to the public since 1995. Visitors can tour and admire the students' impressive handiwork on this site that was formerly an empty field. Weddings and corporate events, along with musicals and other artistic events, are regularly hosted here. Plants are started in the school's greenhouses across the road.

"No drip irrigation here," said Vallée, leading me through the many beds of plants and pots and pointing out those that were drying up or that had succumbed to pest pressures. "We don't do anything beyond what the average knowledgeable Québec gardener would do. It's all about our neutrality."

The ITA professor takes the same approach when examining his students'



Claude Vallée, in the middle of the trials.
Photo by Joel Ceausu



Part of the All-America Selections display gardens. AAS is celebrating

peppers or seeding tables in the 30,000 square feet of greenhouses on campus. “It’s hard as a horticulturist and a plant lover to walk past something that is dying and not do something,” he explained, “but it’s about them learning to care for their plants. We are preparing them for industry.”

The garden’s involvement in trialling has been one success after another, he said, and has been a perfect addition at the 4.5 hectares of themed gardens.

And as an official demo site for Fleuroselect and All America Selections, the garden – which has permanent beds of those selections – has fully established its credibility, on top of Valle’s stature in the industry. Indeed, he wears three hats. He is professor of horticulture, the project manager of the garden and trials, and is also director of the greenhouses at ITA for technology transfer, a project with Université Laval that will add two greenhouses to the current facilities. Older, almost obsolete structures were razed and rebuilt last year to give the school the leading-edge equipment and facilities found in industry.

The yearly Top 10 list, Les Exceptionnelles, is heavily marketed and promoted throughout the province. The wide sampling of plants is narrowed to a smaller list of contenders, thanks to considerable input from the gardening public who are asked to vote on their favourites. This list of consumer favourites is further pruned by an expert jury using criteria pertinent to growers and retailers, as well as consumers: number of flowers, duration of flowering, visual impact, resistance to insects and diseases, adaptation to local climate conditions, and plant care requirements.

Information that can be discerned between the lines of the gardening public’s voting patterns is invaluable, said Vallée. “We can see interest exploding in the third week of certain plants’ growth, which tells the garden centre to advise those who are impatient to steer clear of those varieties. But those who want an aura of mystique or anticipation in their garden would be well advised to purchase them.”



A view of part of last year’s trials.

The trend in Québec is towards more container plants – “instant gardens” – that fetch a little more at retail and are easier to plant. “We have to remember that the typical horticultural consumer in Québec, according to survey data, is a 55-year-old woman with enough money to make impulse purchases. And this, the studies bear out, is inevitably in favour of containers. I think as the population ages we’ll see more of this trend.”

All the leading breeders participate in the trials. Vallée says impatiens remain a popular choice with consumers and retailers. He expects zinnias to fare better as the strong colours attract a lot of attention from visitors.

Often those plants making the biggest impact on consumers will not make the Les Exceptionnelles cut. This is because growers find them too costly to produce. “We have to find a balance,” said Vallée, “because this information is valuable for the producer, the garden centres, and the public. We reduce the risk for growers by providing them with a neutral facility to test their varieties. We help garden centres by letting them know when and how to market the new varieties, and which ones are sure to be stronger sellers.” Most importantly, “the public is getting what it wants. It’s a win-win-win situation.”

The trials and selection of Les Exceptionnelles have won the Jardin Seguin a marketing award from Montreal’s Botanical Gardens.

Another of Vallée’s feats has been bringing together competitors with a common goal of boosting the industry. “There were three retail banners – Hortis, Botanix and Passion Jardins – advertising the same collection last year,” said Vallée. “It’s incredible.”

The display gardens require some \$500,000 annually to maintain. By comparison, the money for the trials is paltry. “I prefer not to solicit large amounts of funding from our partners (growers, retail chains, seed and soil companies). I would rather have many active partners with smaller contributions.”

Indeed, the first year’s trials received a mere \$6,000 from suppliers to cover promotion, growing and maintenance. Last year, however, the various partners increased their assistance to some \$24,000 as they see the value of the work and the neutrality of the process.

Plants are grown and seeded by CIDES, Québec’s experimental greenhouse research centre, and by nearby commercial greenhouses. Vallée is quick to point out this is quite the team effort. “I have more than a few partners,” he said. In addition to garden centre chains and numerous suppliers, Québec’s Federation of Ornamental Horticulture (FIHOQ) and the local trade press are important collaborators.

A full media push has also been helpful getting suppliers and retailers onside, particularly in terms of funding. “The horticulture media is all over this, because they have something to write about and they appreciate our neutrality. The general public is also interested, because this is done in the context of a popular public institution, the gardens and the Institut de technologie.

“It all rests on our reputation,” he said. “This is for the industry. If a company really finds success with Les Exceptionnelles in the market, then I have done my job. It’s not about the garden or the ITA or me, it is about our industry. My job is not out there. It’s right here, getting it done.”

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