

Chicagoland Grows: A Marketing System for New Plants

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INTRODUCTION

Where do new plants for the green industry come from? First, botanic gardens and arboreta offer a great diversity of plants from their collections. Second, individual nurserymen, through their knowledge and experience in growing and observing plants, often have made their own outstanding plant selections. And last, organized breeding programs are developing new plants that otherwise would not naturally occur. For the green industry to benefit from these new selections, it must have access to them.

Often times, new and potentially useful plants remain unknown "pets" of botanical institutions or nurserymen because the plants have not been fully distributed or properly promoted; thus the green industry does not understand their ornamental attributes or horticultural use. A strong marketing plan and industry involvement are both essential in successfully introducing a new plant selection. Based on an introduction program initiated by the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, botanical institutions and the green industry in the Chicago region have teamed up to develop a successful plant introduction program called Chicagoland Grows.

PROGRAM GOALS AND ORGANIZATION

In 1986 the Chicago Botanic Garden initiated the Chicagoland Grows Plant Introduction Program. The program's mission is to introduce recommended plant cultivars that are well adapted to northern conditions. The long-term goal is a timely and regular introduction of new plants. Another important component of the program is to document correctly each plant introduction.

To achieve an effective working program, the Chicago Horticultural Society established, with the cooperation of The Morton Arboretum and the Ornamental Growers Association (OGA) of Northern Illinois, a separate not-for-profit corporation, Chicagoland Grows, Inc. The OGA is comprised of 14 retail and wholesale nurseries in the northern Illinois area that are known for their quality and diverse inventory of plants. The three organizations are partners in the venture, and each has members that participate on executive and operational committees. An important key to the success of the program is a dedicated, full-time staff member to coordinate its operations.

PLANT SELECTION AND EVALUATION

The direct participation of the nursery industry, particularly in regard to the selection of plants, is vital for the success of the program. Nurserymen have the best understanding of the kinds of new plants that are needed and those that are most likely to succeed in the marketplace. Plants entering the program must fit criteria defined by the industry, e.g., clonal selections for plants that are particularly variable when produced from seed, summer-blooming plants, shade-tolerant

plants, small trees good for street tree use, and trees that are tolerant of clayey soils typical of urban planting sites.

Each new plant is tested prior to its release. The evaluation is centered in the upper Midwest, particularly in Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin. The plants are evaluated by plant professionals for their trueness to the selection criteria as well as reliable ornamental characteristics, cold and drought hardiness, and resistance to insects and diseases. Currently there are more than 115 different sites in more than 24 states in which plants are being tested. A group of 32 Chicagoland municipal evaluation cooperators tests the plants' performance under various urban and suburban conditions. In 1993, plants were shipped to Europe for evaluation by Selection New Plants (S.N.P.), a consortium of three major nurseries in France.

During this performance testing, the most practical and economical propagation and production methods are also established. In the past, the challenge to independent nurseries participating in introduction programs was to produce enough plants to test large-scale production methods without an end market. The corporate structure of Chicagoland Grows, Inc. allows this risk to be reduced significantly. The program has licensed a large number of Associate Nurseries (nurseries other than those directly related to the OGA) to purchase plants involved in production and performance testing before full-scale production and marketing are initiated.

PRODUCTION AND MARKETING

After testing is complete, full-scale production is initiated, and a marketing plan, including a market release date, is formulated. More than 50 production nurseries throughout the United States and Canada have been licensed through contractual agreements to produce and sell Chicagoland Grows plants. Although the testing has insured that the plant is worthy of introduction, the end-user, the customer, must be educated about its attributes and uses—a market must be created for the new plant. This is accomplished through publication of plant release bulletins, advertising in appropriate trade journals, lecturing to garden clubs and other educational programs, conducting workshops with wholesale and retail plant merchandisers, and releasing information to the members of both participating institutions. Successful marketing will insure a large demand for the plant. The full-time program coordinator leads this effort. The marketing goal is to peak consumer demand at the same time large quantities of plants are available. This guarantees a rapid and thorough distribution of the plant into the marketplace, insuring that the demand will continue to expand as more consumers become familiar with the plant. A growing demand for the plant will justify increased production by the licensed growers. Plants sold through the program are trademarked, so the cost of operating the program is supported.

CURRENT INTRODUCTIONS

To date, eight plants have been shown to fit the standard of the Chicagoland Grows program and have been promoted and released.

Marmo Freeman maple (*Acer ×freemanii* 'Marmo'). This red maple (*A. rubrum*) and silver maple (*A. saccharinum*) hybrid comes from a tree located near

Lake Marmo at The Morton Arboretum; it was cut down in 1993 due to previous beaver damage to the trunk. The Arboretum received this tree from an unknown nursery source in the mid 1920s, and it was 80 ft (24 m) tall with a spread of 35 ft (10.5 m) when it was propagated for this program. Its leaves are shaped like those of silver maple, but not as deeply lobed. Its foliage is an attractive medium green with a contrasting silver-gray underside and colorful red petioles. Fall color is often an interesting kaleidoscopic blend of scarlet and maroon, offset with tints of green. It has proven superior to the silver maple in branch structure and general strength. No seed is produced.

Chicagoland Green® boxwood (*Buxus* 'Glencoe'). A selection from the collections at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Selected for uniform oval-rounded habit, excellent cold hardiness, good dark green winter color, and ease of propagation. It is probably a hybrid of the Korean littleleaf boxwood (*B. microphylla* var. *koreana*) and the English boxwood (*B. sempervirens*). The useful landscape size is 3 ft (.9 m) tall with a 5 ft (1.5 m) spread; this plant tolerates shearing well.

Fox Valley® river birch (*Betula nigra* 'Little King'). The dwarf, slow-growing selection of the popular river birch has been a longtime favorite in the Chicago landscape and nursery trade. The original plant, estimated to be 15 to 20 years old, was selected by King Nursery, Oswego, IL, in the late 1970s. The parent tree measured 10 ft (3 m) by 12 ft (3.5 m) wide with a dense, compact habit, and attractive exfoliating bark.

Hesse cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster* 'Hessei'). This cultivar is of uncertain parental origin (probably *C. horizontalis* × *C.* 'Nan Shan' [syn. *C. praecox*]) developed by H. A. Hesse, Weener, Germany, in the 1930s. The plant was introduced to the Chicagoland area by The Morton Arboretum in the 1950s. It is a slow-growing, low, deciduous shrub that attains a height of 1 ft (.3 m) to 1.5 ft (.45 m). It spreads as the irregularly bowed branches root as they contact the mulch/soil line. It has shown excellent resistance to spider mite and fire blight (a potentially serious bacterial disease); both of these maladies are common problems for dwarf cotoneaster species and selections. Through promotion and marketing, more than 12,000 plants are now sold annually.

Chicago Fire® euonymus (*Euonymus alatus* 'Timber Creek'). This shrub originated at Timber Creek Nursery, Woodstock, IL. It was selected for cold hardiness, fine-textured branching with mahogany-red stems, bright red fall color, and abundant, long-lasting orange-red fruit. The useful landscape size will be 8 to 10 ft (2.4 to 3 m) tall with a 6-ft (1.8 m) spread.

ARROWWOOD VIBURNUM SELECTIONS

All three selections were made by Ralph Synnestvedt, Sr. of the Synnestvedt Nursery Company, Round Lake, Illinois. Arrowwood viburnums grown from seed are highly variable; these clonal selections are consistent in form and ornamental attributes. All are large deciduous, multi-stemmed shrubs that are tolerant of local growing conditions. They possess creamy white flowers in mid to late June, followed by ornamental clusters of blue-black fruit in late September through October. The fruits are highly attractive to birds and other wildlife.

Northern Burgundy® arrowwood viburnum (*Viburnum dentatum* ‘Morton’). Initially sold as *V. dentatum* var. *pubescens*, it possesses a broad, upright-rounded habit, and moderately glossy, dark green foliage. Fall color is a rich blend of wine-red and Burgundy from mid to late November.

Chicago Lustre® arrowwood viburnum (*V. dentatum* ‘Synnestvedt’). The original plant was recognized as unique in the collections of The Morton Arboretum in 1967. Initially sold incorrectly as *V. bracteatum*, this selection has been correctly identified and registered with the appropriate taxonomic authority and trademarked. This selection has an upright, rounded habit with distinctively thick, dark green, glossy foliage throughout the growing season. Yellow fall color develops late in the fall season.

Autumn Jazz® arrowwood viburnum (*V. dentatum* ‘Ralph Senior’). This selection offers a gracefully upright, vase-shaped habit that is accentuated by slightly pendulous, dark green foliage, and colorful red leafstalks. Fall color is an appealing kaleidoscope blend of yellow, orange, red, and Burgundy during late October.

PLANTS UNDER EVALUATION—POTENTIAL FUTURE INTRODUCTIONS

The following is a highlight of some of the plants that are in various stages of evaluation. Those with an asterisk with their name have not been evaluated thoroughly enough to be given a designated trademark name.

State Street™ Miyabe maple (*Acer miyabei* ‘Morton’). The original tree is located in the collections of The Morton Arboretum. It has been a long-time favorite with the staff. It is selected for the ascending branching habit, excellent cold and drought tolerance, and clean, pest-free foliage. It is a medium- to large-sized tree with a planted height of 40 ft (12 m) with a 25 ft (7.5 m) spread. This selection has potential as a hardy alternative to hedge maple (*Acer campestre*), and a more drought-resistant alternative to Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*).

Prairie Flame™ shining sumac (*Rhus copallina* var. *latifolia* ‘Morton’). This selection was made from a plant growing in The Morton Arboretum; the original seed source was Iroquois County, IL. This dwarf sumac was selected for compact habit, clean glossy foliage, and brilliant, red-orange fall color. Mature size is believed to be 5 ft (1.5 m) in height with a slightly larger spread.

Peking lilac* (*Syringa pekinensis* ‘Morton’). The original tree is located in the collections of The Morton Arboretum. It was grown from seed collected in China by Joseph Rock in 1926 in central Gansu province, People’s Republic of China. It is selected for its upright, narrow form, cold and drought hardiness, and attractive “cherry-like” bark. The original tree is approximately 40 ft (12 m) tall with a 25 ft (7.5 m) spread. In landscape situations it will be useful as a small specimen or street tree. This species has proven highly tolerant of deicing salts.

Accolade™ hybrid elm (*Ulmus* ‘Morton’). The original tree is located in the collections of The Morton Arboretum and is a hybrid of *U. japonica* × *U. wilsoniana* hybrid. It was grown from seed collected at the Arnold Arboretum, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, in 1924. It was selected for the graceful vase-shaped habit, vigorous growth rate, dark green glossy foliage, resistance to Dutch elm disease,

adaptability to varied soils, and good yellow fall color. The original specimen is approximately 60 ft (18 m) tall with a 40 ft (12 m) spread.

Southern blackhaw viburnum* (*V. rufidulum* 'Morton'). The original shrub is located in the collections of The Morton Arboretum. It originated from seed collected in Webb City, Missouri. The species is rare in cultivation. This selection was chosen for cold hardiness, glossy foliage, excellent flower display, and superb Burgundy fall color. The useful size of this slow-growing plant is anticipated to be 8 to 10 ft (2.4 to 3 m) in height with an 8 ft (2.4 m) spread.

Birch* (*Betula* of hybrid origin). A selection growing at the Longenecker Horticultural Gardens of the University of Wisconsin—Madison. This plant originated from seed collected from an open-pollinated plant of *Betula utilis*, distributed by the U.S.D.A. North Central Plant Introduction Station in Ames, Iowa. Planted in the mid-1970s with several other sister seedlings, it is the only remaining specimen that has not been killed by the bronze birch borer. The tree also has a uniform pyramidal growth habit, beautiful satin-white bark, good foliage, and golden-yellow fall color. The original tree is 25 ft (7.5 m) tall with an 8 ft (2.4 m) spread.

Morning SunTM crabapple (*Malus* 'Joy Morton'). The original plant is in the collection at The Morton Arboretum; consistently a top performer in annual evaluations. It is selected for excellent disease resistance, large, fragrant white flowers, abundant clusters of persistent golden-yellow fruit, and good fall color. The original tree, which is over 40 years old, is 25 ft (7.5 m) tall with an arching spread of 35 ft (10.5 m).