

## Finding Your Business Niche<sup>®</sup>

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### THE INHERITED ART OF GROWING PLANTS

I was raised in the greenhouse and nursery business, with overnight, out-of-town trips for plants considered as a vacation. My father, Jack Randolph, started the nursery just after WWII, and my mother, Ruth, joined him as the greenhouse operator, while he pursued landscaping and most of the outdoor production. On family outings, we would trot through botanical gardens and other horticultural businesses, and on our way, we collected plants to bring back for ourselves. The youngest of five, I ended up being the one to stay behind and take over the family business. Beginning in the early 1970s, I have spent most of my spare time searching for new plants to grow and add to our collection. Most of the plants we asexually propagate are tropical, and we add these to annual and perennial container combinations for a colorful effect (Fig. 1).

Our first attempts at container mixes were over 35 years ago, when my mother started making them with the comment that “something in there will like you,” meaning that if the customer neglected or stressed the container combination,



**Figure 1.** Propagation House. This old glass house came with a “boiler” that circulates hot water underneath the benches, making it the ideal house for starting cuttings and seed. Liners are moved out for finishing in other greenhouses as soon as they have established root systems. All cuttings are rooted with very little mist, shaded under newspapers on hot sunny days.

something would survive, leaving the customer with at least one good plant! We would add ferns and ivy to the shady impatiens mixes, and tried a range of goodies in the sunnier mixes. But back then there were not very many variegated or extremely colorful foliage plants on the market, and searching for them, propagating them and producing these unusual plants became our niche.

At Randolph's Greenhouses we discovered the added retail value of having more interesting or unique items in planters. Most of our customers are true gardeners, and really appreciate a well thought out design that includes some dramatically different selections. Many long-term customers educate themselves, as we do, about all the new plant introductions, reading all the best gardening magazines and becoming collectors themselves. People travel for miles, migrating to the plants they search for, and once found, they keep coming back year after year. Adding the newest and best flowers or foliage to your plant pallet will bring in those who are very willing to pay for a unique, colorful, artistically arranged mixed container, especially if it comes in a great pot.

### THE "ART" OF COMBINING

The real art to doing container mixes is pairing the plants with others in a complimentary or contrasting manner (Figs. 2A and B), yet keeping an eye out for predictable behavior or growth habits. Your containers may look fabulous at first, but grow into awkward shapes later on in the season. By planning on their predicted growth habits, your mixes will stand a test of time in the garden setting, and require less maintenance. Pruning plants into submission should not be a requirement of the customer! Plan your mixes so that the outstanding feature plants remain domi-



**Figure 2 A and B.** Our retail greenhouse benches contain many kinds of plants, and too many choices can intimidate a shopper. Displaying the wide array of plant material in color theory groups makes it easier for customers to appreciate foliage and flowers together and simply choose the colors they are attracted to. Every bench contains “thrillers, fillers and spillers” and plenty of beautiful foliage plants mixed with flowers.

nant, and filler material contrasts with the one next to it, yet cohabitates. An example of this would be alternating flowering plants with foliage color as you work around the perimeter of the container.

**Foliage First, Flowers Are a Bonus.** Foliage is so important to an arrangement, collection of plants, or a landscape (Fig. 3). With great-looking, interesting foliage that compliments and contrasts, then you and your customers constantly have something great to look at. The flowers then become the bonus. The first thing to go when a container or collection is stressed is the flowers. Lack of fertilizer, water, or being 'bloomed out' flowers must be dead-headed. Outstanding foliage is crucial for consistently good looks.

Another good rule to follow is "break up your large leaves with fine foliage." Fine textured, ferny or needle-type leaves are the glue that hold all your big leaves together. Too many large leaves can look like beautiful colorful puzzle pieces that just don't quite fit together yet. Fine foliage softens the edges and melds it together.

**The "WOW" Factor and the Rule of Three.** You've undoubtedly heard of the plant design theory; "The Thriller, The Filler, and The Spiller." This term has stuck around for such a long time because its simplicity usually works. This is also known as the "Rule of Three." This and other odd numbers in combinations are often applied to container mixes. One chooses a tall plant, usually of linear-shape, another medium-sized selection that will spread and be bushy, and the third, "spiller" is cascading in nature. Most of our garden center collections can easily fill these roles, and wonderfully profitable designs are achieved in this way. The Rule of Three also works with color choices for your designs, like three primary colors, three colors in a harmony and so on. As primary colors, choose red, yellow, and blue.

Primary colors are pretty lively and exciting. They are usually placed in high-action areas of the garden, or where they need to be seen from a distance. A



**Figure 3.** Rita doing containers. The days of "a spike in a color bowl" are over. Monochromatic arrangements can still be quite interesting, even if the entire arrangement is green. Whether you are designing container gardens or a landscape, you start combining complimentary plants, separating large leaves with fine textured foliage, and under-plant any areas where soil may show or mulch with gravel or other suitable bark.

harmony would be three of one single color family, or with colors close to each other on the color wheel, for example; purple, violet, and lavender. Another would be red, rose, and light pink. These combinations will sooth and calm you. But even more interestingly, the Rule of Three is also wonderfully helpful in respect to a plant's foliage size and shape.

**Containers Complete the Selection: Listen to the Plants.** Once you've played around with fabulous plant collections, the container you choose to put them in can mean the difference in a nice mix, and an exceptional grouping.

Many times I have been found to walk around our empty containers with some plants in my arms, holding them up for comparison and compatibility, asking them "... who wants to go with us?" and "What pot do you want to go in?" Listening to the plants is a lot like shopping for fabric, or a searching for a shirt and tie that go together. The same rules of contrast and compliment apply. Even though you may not be able to describe the act of listening, it seems to come naturally the more it is practiced! I heard a phrase once, "What thrills one person, chokes another!" so be prepared for most any reaction to your new container designs, including laughter. We, at Randolph's, believe that great plants deserve great pots, whether it is on a large proportion, or on the smallest scale.