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Pack Trials 2004 — Part I



So many good plants, so little time.

By Rick Schoellhorn
 University of Florida



The 2004 Pack Trials was a great experience this year. A lot of fantastic plant material, some killer new plant materials and some companies that really hit their stride and made some big advances in trials and displays. There was a bit more emphasis put back on comparison trialing which is always good to see. I wasn't around for the early days of Pack Trials when the main thrust was comparative trialing, but it is great to see some of that mixed in with displays of current releases in their prime.

It was not an easy year to put on a good display, as temperatures in California were soaring and plunging all spring, making it difficult to time crops for the trials. We also went through trials on the last days of the event so some of the truly early cool season crops were a little past peak. It also seemed that the number of new releases were, in general, a little more conservative this year, and given the recent political and economical climate, I guess that is to be expected. The number of new crop releases seemed lower, and the number of improvement to existing series seemed a bit higher.



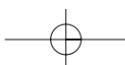
Clockwise from top: 'Raspberry Smoothie' thunbergia (Ecke); rhodochiton (Benary); 'Wine Red' lophospermum (Suntory).

SOME STANDOUTS

Gaillardia. I was really pleased to see Ernst Benary of America's new facility, and this year's display looked better than ever. They also were highlighting a few things that

we are focusing on in our trials this year, so it was a really informative stop as well. A couple of highlights from Benary would have to include its *Gaillardia x grandiflora* release 'Arizona Sun'. This cultivar was an

All America Selection and is noted for earliness of flower and large flowers on a compact plant. This is a seed-produced hybrid (as some of the other crops are we'll be discussing this year) but has good





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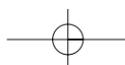


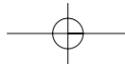
uniformity and vigor. We have about 32 cultivars and ecotypes of gaillardia in the trials this year, and Arizona Sun was everything Benary said it would be. Other gaillardia in the trials this year included Ball FloraPlant's Torch series, which is a double, and you'll definitely want to check out 'Fanfare' (licensed to Plant Haven), which is also a strong compact grower as well with unique flower structure. One of the more unique color mixtures is Yoder Brother's 'Summer's Kiss', which combines yellow petals with a blush of salmon pink and a softer less orange/bronze coloring; I really like this cultivar for its unique shades. All gaillardia need high light, good drainage and a bit less fertilizer than most bedding plants and perennials, so if you are growing gaillardia go light on fertilizer and water, and avoid overcrowding on the bench.

Rhodochiton. Another cool crop (both in season and uniqueness) that was on display at Benary was *Rhodochiton atrosanguineum* (purple bell vine). Rhodochiton is a really novel annual vine; flower shape is somewhat fuchsia-like, but the calyx is rose-purple and the corolla purple-black. It has a bit of a sinister feeling to it, but for retailers it is bound to draw a lot of attention in baskets for spring. The plant is a bit stringy in growth habit and does best with support, so produce it in baskets with hangers attached so it can run up and over the hook and spill back down in strands of purple bells. Cool temperatures and bright light are best for growth and flowering, so avoid hot greenhouses, which causes stretching and reduced flowering. Rhodochiton is available from other seed suppliers as well; it has been drifting around the rare seed suppliers for quite a few years, but I hope it is making it into mainstream production. I also saw this plant at Hem Genetics in Holland during the 2004 European Pack Trials.

Lophospermum. While we're on the subject of cool season and unique vines I was really happy to see Suntory has improved and will be releasing *Lophospermum erubescens* 'Wine Red'. Some of you may know this plant as *Asarina erubescens*, and it does look like a snapdragon vine, but

Top to bottom: 'White' thunbergia (Jaldety); 'Summer's Kiss' gaillardia (Yoder); 'Arizona Sun' gaillardia (Benary).





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on steroids. Leaf size and flowers are 2-3 times more vigorous, and it has a lot more heat tolerance. The original form of this plant is a pale pink, but Wine Red is a deep luxuriant burgundy, and with support, it can easily grow to be a

tower of 6 feet with masses of 3-inch flowers interspersed in the pale green foliage. I have had the original pink type return as a perennial for three years in my garden in Florida, so this plant is tough! In the South it will flower

best in the cool nights of spring and summer, but the blooming season should be extended in Northern production. Both these vines start out a bit thin when first planted and benefit from growing up and being wound about the

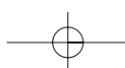
hanger a bit until they develop a good density, but once in flower, either one will be a show stopper.

HEAT LOVERS

Thunbergia. Ok, moving from cool-season flowering vines to those



Left to right: 'Charles Star' thunbergia (Jaldety); 'Apricot Smoothie' thunbergia (Ecke); 'Orange' thunbergia (Jaldety); 'Lemon Star' thunbergia (Jaldety).





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For more information on the varieties discussed in this article, direct your inquiries to the following companies.

Ball FloraPlant
(630) 231-3600
www.ballfloraplant.com

Jaldety Nursery (Agrexco Ltd.)
+972-8-9437163

Ernst Benary of America
(815) 895-6705
www.benary.com

PanAmerican Seed
(630) 231-1400
www.panamseed.com

PlantHaven
(805) 569-0169
www.planthaven.com

Jackson & Perkins — Suntory Corp.
(541) 864-2660
www.surfinia.com

Paul Ecke Ranch (The Flower Fields)
(760) 753-1134
www.ecke.com

that can take the heat. Ecke Ranch had something I had never seen before its release for next year — a lavender-pink thunbergia. Most of the *Thunbergia alata* hybrids are either orange or yellow tones, but this plant ('Raspberry Smoothie') was a clear lavender-pink tone, really distinct! I'm looking forward to seeing it perform in the South next year. The lavender form was only one of the new releases, and the sec-



'Orange Beauty' (Jaldety)

ond was 'Apricot Smoothie' a distinctive orange with burgundy shading towards the throat, both of these new types are definitely a step away from the old fashioned black eyed Susan vine.

Other vegetative thunbergia on the market include Ball FloraPlant's yellow and orange releases from last year, which were outstanding and also a new series of promising colors from Jaldety Nursery, one of the Israel-based Agrexco companies: 'Orange Beauty', 'Orange', 'Charles Star' (yellow), 'Lemon Star' (vivid yellow) and 'White'.

I have always loved this group of plants for its tough garden habit and long flower season. There are tropical forms as well that are fantastic for the South but problematic for the Northern grower, the best of that group of thunbergia is *T. battiscombei*, which has royal blue flowers with a yellow throat, and it is a tough perennial at least through USDA Zone 8. These plants are heat tolerant, tolerate full sun and warm

temperatures and grow like weeds, so avoid too much water and fertilizer as they will easily overgrow most containers in production. It is nearly impossible to hold them back with plant growth regulators, so schedule carefully and sell them before they take you over.

Always seems at Pack Trials time that I run out of space before I get even half way through the new plants, but next month's article will go over a few more and hopefully at least give you a primer on what to look for in 2005. Man, do we have a great industry or what? GPN

Rick Schoellhorn is extension specialist at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla. He can be reached by phone at (352) 392-1831 x364 or E-mail at rksch@mail.ifas.ufl.edu.

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