



CROSS Fertilization

Floral Management's 2000 Marketer of the Year hosted a tour of 22 greenhouses in Southern California and proved there is strength in numbers.

B y A m a n d a T e m p l e

Would you spend

months in detail-heavy preparation, thousands of dollars in promotion and countless hours scrubbing, painting and gussying up for your open house if you knew that your competition was doing the exact same thing ... *on the exact same day.*

Well, if you're Janet Kister, you'd not only do it but you'd look around your spotless nursery and hope your competitors in Southern California were working just as hard to get the grime out of their greenhouses and the word out about their open house.

Kister, co-owner of Sunlet Nursery Inc., in Fallbrook, Calif., was one of 22 plant nursery owners who joined forces to attract new customers and meet current ones at their operations in Southern California. Was the force a powerful one? Just ask the close to 300 plant buyers who

traveled from nursery to nursery this past February, placing orders, asking growers what took them so long to host this kind of event and raving about it in follow-up surveys. Or ask the judges of Floral Management's seventh annual Marketer of the Year contest, who selected the organizers of Southern California Plant Tour Days as this year's winner.

The Perfect Hosts

Buyers from across the country headed west for the first-ever Southern California Plant Tour Days, held for three days in late February. Like organizers of one very, very big block party, the nursery owners opened up their doors, set out the snacks and gave visitors a tour of the place.

Platters of finger sandwiches emptied as quickly as order forms filled up. At least 120 new customers purchased \$283,000 between the mid-February tour and the end of April. Existing customers who attended are projected to increase their purchases by \$2,060,000. Overall, participating nurseries reported that they expect a sales boost of \$3,520,000, thanks to the tour.

Growers **share** customers, ideas, and the spotlight



Janet Kister, Sunlet Nursery, Inc. shakes hands with Evelyn Weidner, Weidner's Greenhouses. Other participants included (clockwise, from left): Tony Godfrey, Olive Hill Greenhouses; Jim Rietkerk, Kallisto Greenhouses; Michael Rote, Rote Greenhouses; Brenda Vanderveldt, Dutch Growers Nursery; Bas Denbraver, Twin Oaks Growers International; Scott Brown, Brown's Plants; Mark Hamm, West Coast Nurseries; Alissa Adams, San Diego County Flower & Plant Association; Dee James, Baxendale Nursery; Todd Ingham, Robert R. Hall, Inc.; Willi Voelker, B.A.P. Nursery; A.J. Brown, Brown's Plants; Gerald Voge, Vreeland Nursery International; Jennifer Gaggero, The Good Earth Nursery; Kathy Rietkerk, Kallisto Greenhouses; John Kister, Sunlet Nursery, Inc.; Gina Mendoza, Paul Ecke Ranch.

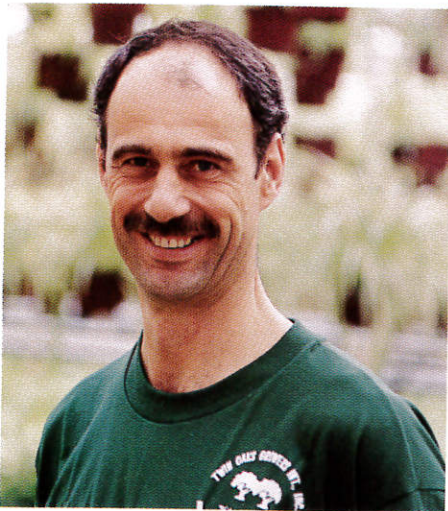
"Going into this, we thought 'maybe we'll get about 50 people and that will be good,'" says Kister, who served as the event chairperson. "But 300 people? Obviously, our customers were just waiting for this to happen."

The turnout is only part of the reason greenhouse owners are celebrating.

The participants, many of whom compete for the same business, teamed up to promote the event, reach potential attendees and help one another prepare. That's 22 different schedules, work styles, agendas, customer lists, budgets and personalities coming together.

"It was common knowledge that the growers in Southern California are fiercely independent and rarely cooperated," Kister explains, emphasizing the past tense. "So we had some fears to calm, doubts to erase ... we had some work to do."

But that's all history now. Here's how "history" was made.



Bas Denbraver, Twin Oaks Growers International, was one of the 22 "fiercely independent" growers who juggled schedules, customer bids and budgets to organize Plant Tour Days.

From Talking to Touring

Over the years, growers in Southern California had tossed around the idea of doing something together to bring potential buyers to the region. After much tossing, a group of 10 growers finally decided to grab on to it. About a year ago, Michael Kent, co-owner of Kent's

House Party

One of the key ingredients to the tour's success was making sure every participant was prepared. Laurie Scullin, marketing director at Paul Ecke Ranch, prepared this tip sheet. Participants also met one on-one to discuss issues specific to their operations.

- Choose a central area to create a display similar to a trade show booth or pack trials display.

- Show a full range of your product, including how you package the product and the services you provide.

- Identify the one thing that makes your nursery special and focus on it: Is it products, quality, unique selection, superior freight solutions, etc.?

- Pick a theme for your nursery display and make sure the theme ties back to your company image or product message.

- Have an up to date handout with a history/bio of your nursery and packets which include your price list, product promotional material, packing information, a credit application and possibly customer testimonials. Answer the question: "Why should they buy from you?"

- Address creature comforts with bottled water, coffee (caffeine), cold sodas and light snacks such as fruit, cookies, or crackers and cheese.

- Be sure your rest room facilities are clearly marked and scrupulously clean. Get in porta potties if necessary. Note: lady buyers do not like to use male portable facilities... or ones without sufficient supplies.

- Plan to contact your key customers ahead and encourage them to come early or stay late, so you can share a meal. Have a gift for your top buyers.

- Consider free samples of your product line by having a table with a selection of your choice and an order form where a potential customer can pick one item and you will ship it gratis.

- Consider putting theme/logo on sleeves, boxes or gift giveaways like logo pens, T-shirts, or a catalog of items where customer picks their own and you prepay like a gift certificate.

- Having music playing in the background.

- Sales staff and growers should be on the premises and available during the duration of the Plant Tour Days Open House to take advantage of the opportunity to meet and talk with all visiting potential and existing customers and buyers. Make sure your staff are easily identified — name tags are critical.

—A.T.

Bromelaid Nursery in Vista, Calif., had what would be the last "when-are-we-going-get-together-and-do-something?" conversation with Eric Anderson, president of the San Diego County Flower & Plant Association. "That's when we decided to sit down and talk together," Kister says. "And we knew we had to get everyone involved or it would never get off the ground."

But why now? Because the fish are biting, the iron is hot, the getting is good. "Business is very good for all of us now,

we know our customers are in a buying mode, so now is the time to show them everything we have," she says. "We all understand that business is cyclic. But now when there's a down-turn, we will have strengthened relationships and built new ones."

As members of the group, the growers already had the channels to get the word out and buy-in from other growers. Although "fiercely independent," the growers aren't cut-throat, Kister says, thanks to plenty of network-

ing and the simple fact that not everyone can sell everything. For example, if a buyer needed cactus, bromeliad and potted plants, no one California greenhouse could fulfill the order. The greenhouses knew they'd benefit from "selling" their combined selections.

"The reality is we all share customers," says Laurie Scullin, marketing director at Paul Ecke Ranch, Encinitas, Calif. "So why not share our resources to get more of them?"

Why not indeed?

Healthy Competition

Brainstorming about ways to drive more traffic is one thing. Handing your coveted customer list over to the competition, no matter how friendly, is another. "We all knew that by trying to get more customers into this area, we would all grow. We all understood the more customers from out of state, the more trucks rolling out of here. That was the easy sell," Kister says. "The hard part was convincing everyone that an effective direct-mail campaign wouldn't threaten their own

individual marketing tactics."

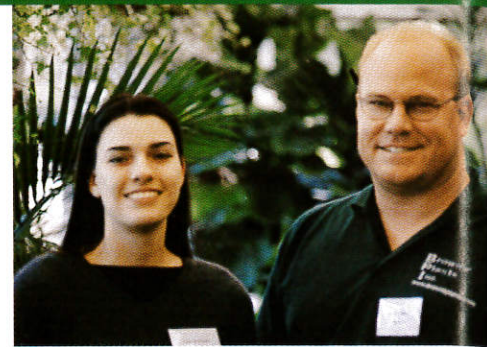
To ensure privacy, the group hired a third-party mailing house to create one master list and handle all direct mailing. Still, participants were very resistant and it took several meetings to get everyone in agreement.

"Consensus on everything is the only way we can do this," Kister says. Not only did they have to agree on what to do, the participants had to agree on what not to do.

"I knew people would be tempted to pull their best customers off the list, so we addressed that head on," she says. "First off, they're probably on someone else's list, so they're going to get an invite anyway. And if they're not and you don't invite them ... Well now you've just offended your best customers."

Promote, Promote, Promote

The point was a good one. Fears vanished and direct-mail pieces appeared. "It was never a concern once we hired the mailing house," Scullin says. In November, they



Leslie Cook and Scott Brown of Brown's Plants Inc.; Craig Pearson, Jim Baker of Pearson and Company and Jennifer Gaggero of The Good Earth Nursery show their wares.

mailed 3,600 invitations to individual buyers. And just in case the holidays got too hectic, they were sent again in January. They supplemented the customer mailing by targeting metropolitan areas with the highest concentration of buyers.

More than 300 replies came in and

What Makes a Marketer of the Year?

When Floral Management launched the Marketer of the Year Award in 1994, we hoped to draw attention to some of the industry's outstanding marketing efforts — and inspire the rest of the industry with their ideas. Floral Management invites retailers, wholesalers and growers to take part in the contest, luring them with the prospect of a \$5,000 cash prize. For the seventh year in a row, that cash prize is sponsored by Design Master color tool, Inc.

The Criteria

What constitutes an outstanding marketing effort? The judges are charged with reviewing the entries and rating each entrant in the following four categories: effectiveness of campaign, originality, professionalism and overall excellence.

The Judges

We know that only experienced marketers with a track record of success are qualified to judge other marketing efforts. So, each

year we choose a panel of seasoned professionals within and outside the floral industry.

J. Sten Crissey, AAF, retailer, Crissey Flowers & Gifts in Seattle, Wash., and past president of SAF.

John Donati, grower, Ocean View Flower in Lompoc, Calif.

Steve Dhalloff, marketing director for Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, the agency that handles the Society of American Florists consumer relations campaign.

Chuck Gainan, AAF, retailer, Gainan's Flowers in Billings, Mont.

Colleen Taber, grower/importer, Garden America, Inc., in Miami.

How to Enter

Want to be an entrant in Floral Management's 2001 Marketer of the Year? Call, fax or e-mail a request for an entry to Cheryl M. Burke at Floral Management, (800) 336-4743; fax (800) 208-0078; e-mail cburke@safnow.org. Applications for the 2001 award will be mailed after the first of the year.



Experts from the Paul Ecke Ranch shared tips on how to have an unforgettable open house.

that's when the promotional efforts kicked into high gear. Fueled by the "Let the Southern California Plants Grow Your Profits" theme, the group made sure each marketing piece complemented the sunny, bright, healthy image of California. Everyone involved contributed ideas and time to creating the marketing materials. "We wanted to emphasize our wonderful climate with the sun and what we produce with the potted plant imagery," Kister says.

The group, relying on the varied strengths and contacts of its members, sent press releases to 22 state and national industry trade journals, and several picked up on the story. "We pushed for pre-event coverage because we wanted to create a buzz in the industry," Kister says. Personal invitations from each nursery to its customers reinforced the direct-mail piece.

Sensitive to the fact no one had attended nor hosted anything like this before, the organizers kept a steady stream of pre-event materials flowing to both participating nurseries and attendees. They also held monthly meetings, exhorting members to remind customers of the event in every correspondence. All 374 registrants found a bright yellow nursery guide in their mailboxes months before the event. The guide includes profiles of each host nursery, detailed maps and some shipper contact information. Instead of a loading up on one bus tour, the participants were able to choose their own schedules and routes, so

the maps were key. Next came hotel suggestions and information about the all-nursery reception.

Supplying the Troops

The participants were just as diligent in preparing one another, knowing that one bad stop could ruin the entire tour for a visitor. And since some of the wholesalers were more seasoned marketers with open house experience, they were able to lead by example. For example, Paul Ecke had hosted several PAC trials and was able to share some insight to the logistics of showing off. Scullin, "a marketing whiz" Kister says, prepared a detailed primer on the how-tos of making your open house unforgettable (see sidebar p. 24).

Kent prepared a "trucking solutions" sheet, a master list of commonly used shippers and consolidators with shipping details to help field questions from out-of-state attendees.

Each nursery received a large Plant Tour sign to post along the route and a list of pre-registrants, organized by business type and customer name, to facilitate follow-up.

And everyone swapped business cards, updated their Palm Pilots and shook some hands with new contacts. "We all work 80-hour weeks and we do not get out and mingle enough," says Pat Hammer, owner of Samia Rose Topiary in Encinitas, Calif. "It gives us much more strength and it gave us a chance to get to know each other."

The event also gave them more financial leverage. The total cost for marketing and preparation materials was \$17,083, a price tag no single nursery could afford. "The benefit of working together is great economies of scale," Scullin says. "We could do a nice color pamphlet, hold a very cool reception and talk to more people than we ever could have just ourselves."

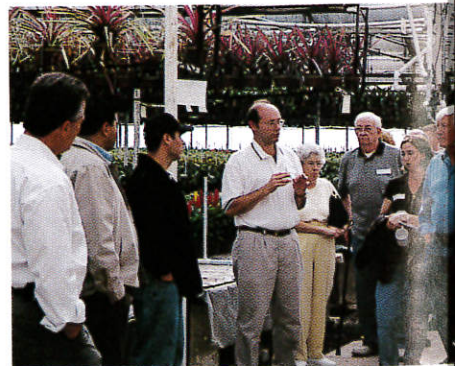
Bill Kovach, owner of Specimen House, agrees. "The most intelligent

marketing event of the tour was that it happened at all," he says. "We have exhibited at many trade shows around the country and had always wanted the customer to come and look at the facility and the total product — not what was just shown in a booth at a trade show."

It happened, Kister explains, because everyone involved contributed time, money and experience. "When you have killer people with killer resources, no one gets stuck doing all the work," says Kister. However, the group did hire an administrator to handle most travel arrangements, catering and other planning details.

Glitch-free ... Almost

While a lot of work went into pre-tour coordinating and cleaning up, visitors, judging from the post-tour survey, were impressed with the seamless, glitch-free event. From the beginning, organizers were intent on making it easy for visitors



Above: Larry Kent leads a tour of Kent's Bromeliad Nursery. Below: Sunlet Nursery shows off its best products.



Tony Godfrey visitor at Olive Hill Greenhouses.

to see what they want, do what they want and buy what they want.

But the tour was as much about camaraderie and comfort as it was about commerce. Praise for the simple comforts, like snacks and brochures, dominated the survey.

“We felt it was important to have good ‘creature comforts’ available, like good food and a place to sit down,” Scullin explains. Finger sandwiches weren’t the only popular offering. Paul Ecke Ranch staff also prepared a infor-

mation package with catalogs and price information and gave tours to those who wanted to see the whole ranch. “But mostly, we listened.”

At Samia Rose Topiary, the entire staff was available during tour time so customers could “learn first-hand that we really know our stuff,” says Hammer, who also set up a photo story board with lots of helpful information about available plants.

With 22 growers to see, many of the attendees didn’t have time to take a full-scale tour. That’s why several greenhouses created “mini-trade show booths.” For example, instead of taking someone to the back-40, Kister says she was able to give the a quick run-down of the products available, supply them with some company literature and display examples of each type of crop.

There was one hiccup in terms of

scheduling. Kent’s Bromelaid held a special event during the tour, attracting several visitors to hear a speaker. Unfortunately, this created a traffic jam, leaving the other growers wondering where everyone went. Next year, participants will schedule any add-on attractions after plant tour hours.

Wait Till Next Year

Attendees might have to wait, but the organizers are already mapping out next year’s tour, making sure to avoid any wrong turns from this year and share the lessons learned by all.

“Having the same tour over and over again will become boring to our current and newly acquired customers,” Kovach says. “Our largest challenge is to continue to make the tour interesting to the customers and profitable to the nurseries.”





Star Alstroemeria Star Million Stars Star Carnations



Cultivating Distinction in Flowers

available exclusively through a wholesaler near you!



305.591.3024 • 1.800.933.3437 • fax 305.591.8767 • 2882 NW 72 Ave., Miami, FL 33122-1310 USA • www.edenfloral.com

Kovach is spearheading the creation of a Web site for Plant Tour Days, to better promote and facilitate registration for next year's event. The group is working with hotels, airlines and car rental companies to secure group rates.

They've also reviewed slides taken during the event, since no one got to see how

the other operations gussied up and showcased fresh product. Growers are poring over the post-survey comments, from both participants and attendees, taking note of what the customers liked (lots of fresh product, scheduling freedom and yummy snacks) and what they would have liked more of (travel information,



Above: Denise and Demi Rae Torrez show items at Sunlet Nursery, Inc.

Below: Bras and Micah Dembrauer pose with visitors at Twin Oaks Growers International.

Just In Time

For Fall Sales **All Seasons Flowers** is bringing you ample supplies of the following flowers:

- Stargazer Lilies
- Asiatic Lilies
- Oriental Lilies
- L.A. Hybrid Lilies
- Delphinium
- Snapdragons



- Stock
- Sunflowers
- Larkspur
- Matsumoto Asters
- Iris
- Freesia

Our **"Just In Time"** philosophy is born out of our total commitment to bring you the freshest flowers possible by the quickest and most efficient shipping methods.

We can do this by accurately controlling our growing environment by use of our retractable roof greenhouses, which will in turn provide you with the right product at the right time.

When we reach our production targets, you reach your sales targets.

For more information on our products, please contact your local wholesaler.



Flowers from **All Seasons** for **ALL SEASONS**

P. O. Box 409, Nipomo, CA 93444
 Phone: (888) ASF-LILY (273-5459)
 (805) 343-4004 • Fax (805) 343-1353

E-mail: sales@allseasonsflowers.com • Web Site: www.allseasonsflowers.com

time, detailed maps and schedules).

A new guide is in the works, with better maps and a cross-referenced index to help attendees find products by plant type, grower and area.

The participants are discussing standards to ensure that the quality and convenience of the event isn't sacrificed when more growers join. For example, since visitors come from all over the country (at least 55 percent were from out of state), participating growers must have adequate shipping procedures in place.

Individual nurseries owners are working on their "If I could do it all over again" resolutions. Hammer wants to create a small pack for the customer to take home with an actual topiary. Scullin has visions of a more focused event at The Paul Ecke Ranch to buttress the overall tour, perhaps focusing on its reknown Christmas product. "The idea would be to do it outside open house hours and really target existing customers.

"Your customers are here, you better make the most of it," he says. 🌿

Amanda Temple is the managing editor of Floral Management. E-mail: atemple@safnow.org.