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Miles of TRIALS

THE NEWEST CULTIVARS WILL BE ON DISPLAY AT THE CALIFORNIA SPRING TRIALS. BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

EACH SPRING SINCE 1965, plant breeders and marketers have put their latest cultivars on display for a week in California. The event has grown steadily, and this year more than 40 companies will give visitors a preview of what will be available in 2010 and beyond. Though originally geared toward growers, the trials now are attended by representatives from many corners of the Green Industry, including landscapers, garden centers and big box retailers.

The dates that were originally set for the 2010 trials were pushed back from March 20-26 to April 10-17 at this year's OFA Short Course. The later dates will give breeders more time to deliver their best plant materials. Plants will be on display at dozens of open houses along the central and southern coasts of California.

The opportunities for landscapers who attend the California Spring Trials are many. Formerly known as the Pack Trials because

the displays focused on greenhouse "packs" of flowers, the trials now include plant performance information for each step of the distribution chain, including landscape installation. The event is the largest flower exhibition in the horticultural industry, so landscapers can get a first-hand look at the new color that will be available to them.

Design ideas will be easy to come by because the open houses have large displays and landscape demonstrations that feature various color and height combinations. Attendees can also learn what goes into breeding cultivars for color, hardiness and disease resistance — and have the opportunity to speak directly with plant breeders.

The state of the art in flower production is a constantly moving target. Each year, new cultivars are released that perform better than the old standbys. Knowing what those new cultivars are and how they perform in your area is a competitive advantage landscapers can use to gain and retain customers.

For the most up-to-date information, and to make appointments with the participating companies, visit the National Garden Bureau's Spring Pack Trial page at www.ngb.org/spring_trials. 🌱

The California Spring Trials will be bursting with color and ideas for landscape bed designs.

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The Clear Crystal series from **Ball Landscape** offers big flowers and a bigger plant size for better heat tolerance than standard alyssum. Get ready for outdoor shows in shades of lavender, purple and white. The flower is especially harmonious with pansies. The tetraploid construction of the series delivers more vigor than standard diploid varieties, according to the company. **BallLandscape.com**

Award-winning marigold

As a 2010 All-America Selections winner, Marigold F1 African Moonsong Deep Orange from **Syngenta Flowers** offers fade-resistant, double-bloom flowers that range from 2.5 to 3.5 in. in diameter. The stress-resistant plants flower in about 70 to 84 days, and grow to 15 in. tall. Over the summer, the old blooms will be covered with green foliage — which keeps the plants looking fresh throughout the growing season. **GoldsmithSeeds.com**




Hot shades of Winter Jewels

New for 2010 from **Terra Nova**, Helleborus Winter Jewels Peppermint Ice has large, double picotees that are light pink with a rim of dark pink edging. This clumping perennial is most active in late winter to early spring, and requires dappled shade (full sun in the Northwest). It's equally at home in mixed beds, cottage garden layouts or as understory. Other new shades this year in the Winter Jewels series include Amber Gem, Berry Swirl, Cotton Candy, Harlequin Gem, Jade Tiger, Onyx Odyssey, Sparkling Diamond and Painted Doubles. **TerraNovaNurseries.com**


Summer shot of color

Proven Winner's Lil Miss Sunshine bluebeard is a cross between Petit Bleu and Sunshine Blue. It delivers shiny yellow foliage all summer long, and features a compact habit. Abundant blue flowers appear in late summer on this deer-resistant, butterfly-attracting shrub. With a height of 30 to 36 in., it can be used as an addition to a mixed border or perennial bed. **ProvenWinners.com**




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ACUTABOVE

GREEN INDUSTRY MAINTENANCE LEADERS » BY DAN JACOBS

Taking the high road is easier because it's always less traveled. That's a lesson **Donna Vignocchi**, president and CEO of Wauconda, IL-based **ILT Vignocchi**, learned from father Harry, who started the company 40 years ago. It's one of the lessons she uses to run her maintenance company.

TOP TRENDS

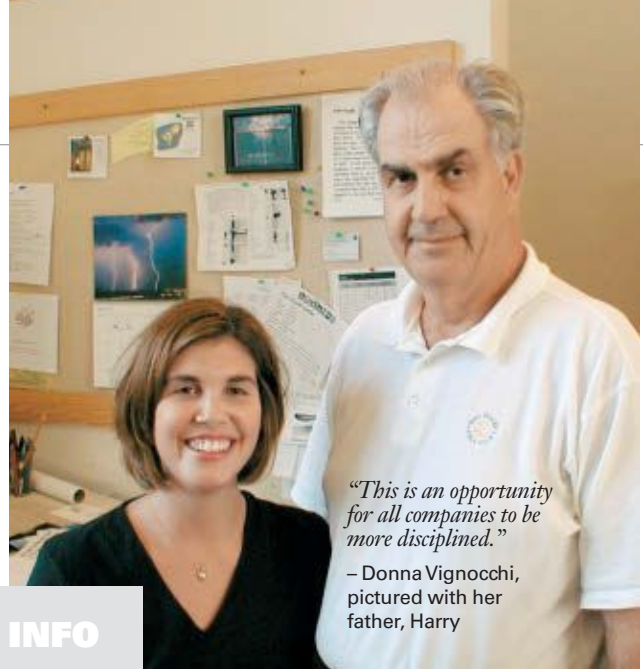
» **Price pressure.** The biggest trend right now has been the downward motion of price. I believe, that in our market, landscape maintenance is becoming much more of a commodity than a service. People are less concerned with quality than they have been, and that's simply because of the reality of the economy.

» **Going green.** There are very few ways to differentiate yourself when you do landscape maintenance. One way to do it is to be really cheap. The other approach is to provide a quality service. In our market, in Chicago, customers won't tolerate poor customer service, unless you're on the inexpensive side. Companies such as ours are driving this green sentiment at the forefront of their consumer messaging to differentiate themselves. It's a movement pervasive among all industries. Everybody is advertising "green." It's a trend, but it's also the biggest opportunity moving into 2010.

TOP OBSTACLES

» **Recession woes.** We must figure out how to compete; how to retain customers when everything is seemingly about price. How do we continue to exist and be profitable when we have to compete in this type of market? We have to continue to cut our costs and reevaluate things such as benefits. ILT always has been a benefits-rich company. Those are things we have to look at. This recession isn't something we're going to see end in the near future. We're looking at three to five years.

» **Tight lending.** Lending institutions are unwilling to lend. They're all out saying they weren't one of those banks that had to take the money and "we're still lending." Your ability to fund growth or



"This is an opportunity for all companies to be more disciplined."

– Donna Vignocchi, pictured with her father, Harry

INSIDE INFO

Company: ILT Vignocchi

Headquarters: Wauconda, IL

Year established: 1969

Employees: 20 full-time and 130 seasonal employees

LM Top 150 rank: 130

Key to being a maintenance leader: Never buy the second truck. I'm not kidding. That's my biggest piece of advice. Having more than 50 vehicles with umpteen number of safety incidents a year ... I don't necessarily believe volume has anything to do with being a leader. Being a leader means not being afraid to stand up for what you believe in. The people we employ are passionate about horticulture. We're supposed to be stewards of everything that grows. That's what a leader is.

buy new equipment for replacement programs, and now pay cash out of pocket, is almost impossible. It's a crisis. I think of companies such as ours that have been in business for 40 years that are sound, and I'm so frightened for those companies that aren't. It's scary. That's one of the biggest obstacles for small businesses right now.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

» **Work the hurt.** Our vendors have less business, just like we do. It could be less volume; it could be lower prices. Because of that, they're offering us substantial discounts we've been able to take advantage of. It's a significant opportunity for companies that can take advantage of it.

» **Topgrading.** There's an enormous opportunity to pick up talented people. I don't think that's something our industry could say three years ago. There were very few good people out there looking for work. Now, there are a lot of

talented, qualified people looking for work. It's a good time to consider topgrading personnel. If you're looking to expand into other markets, now is a great time to staff up.

» **Spend wisely.** This is an opportunity for all companies to be more disciplined. That's a very good thing. We've learned many lessons throughout the past two years that have been invaluable to me as a leader and valuable to our staff as a team. You tend to view things a bit more conservatively.

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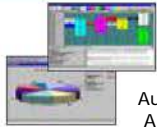
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Same resolutions, renewed resolve

In March 2009, I wrote a column, “What are you going to do with all of the time you’ve been given?” I concluded it by sharing my professional, personal and spiritual To-Dos.

Looking in the rearview mirror, it’s clear that outside of a few sporadic successes, I fell a bit short working toward those goals. The resolutions were (and still are) solid, but my resolve wavered.

Because the goals are desirable and attainable, and I wholeheartedly believe in second chances, I’m giving my resolutions another go-around. Here are my 10 resolutions for 2010:

1. Eat Less. Move More. Four words ... Simple, but not easy. Like a lot of things in life, I have to stay committed to improving both sides of the ledger to gain ground (instead of pounds).

2. Spend Less. Save More. As The Great Recession lingers, many of us will make the same or less this year. Meanwhile, the cost of fuel, food, utilities and medical coverage will continue to climb. The good news is if I’m successful at Resolution 1, it automatically fortifies my efforts toward Resolution 2. By the way, did you know fast food isn’t considered a necessity in other parts of the world?

3. Talk Less. Listen, Think and Take Action More. God gave each of us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Growing up with nine siblings, interruptions sometimes seemed my only way into conversations. But now that I’m allegedly “all grown up,” that same behavior gets me nowhere. This goal includes not playing psychic by trying to finish people’s sentences.

4. Worry Less. Pray More. The worrying comes and goes, as does the praying. But the praying is gaining steam while the worrying is stalling. Hmm ... Perhaps they’re inversely related.

5. Grump Less. Laugh, Love and Live More. I need to adopt an attitude of gratitude and carry it with me throughout each day. I’m blessed beyond belief. I need to cherish every moment I have with the special people, gifts and grace God showers upon me at home and work. I might never be a millionaire, but that’s OK. I’m relationship rich.

6. Take Less. Give More. I’m not where I could or should be with this one, but I do experience magical moments of getting out of self and getting into others. I hope to make this a daily deal. My oldest brother, Jim, tried to help three people a day and not let anyone else know about it. If others discovered his good deeds, they “didn’t count.” (I won’t share my progress on this goal because I want all of my random acts of kindness to count.)

7. Reach Out More. My goal is to connect with at least 20 readers every month. Thousands of lawn care, landscape maintenance, design/build and irrigation professionals and an expansive family of marketing partners subscribe to our magazine. Consistently connecting with the customer will help us take our relationships and integrated media solutions to the next level.

8. Plan Your Work. Work Your Plan. A host of professional To-Dos fall under this goal, including improving communications, strategic planning and tactical execution. The action list is lengthy and complex, but the desired by-product is singular and simple, albeit a bit militaristic: *We* need to do all we can do to become all we can be.

9. Complete HUGE Heart Home Makeover. This one was the brainchild of Group Publisher Kevin Stoltman. After we barely missed winning an “Extreme Makeover Home Edition” renovation for friends, Kevin convinced me to not give up. With Kevin’s gentle urging, last year I organized and promoted a local project to raise funds and expand and remodel the home of the Gaspar family of Fairview Park, OH. Adam Gaspar, my buddy since the first grade, lost his 10-month battle with cancer Sept. 30, 2008. In no way can this endeavor offset the loss of Adam, but it is bringing together an entire community in a beautiful act of service that will make home a little sweeter for Adam’s widow, Ann, and their six children.

10. Write and publish a book. In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve been writing this classic — “Whit’s World ... Living proof that evolution is overrated” — one month, one column at a time.