

“Foremost” In Foliage

by Stella K. Naegely

Artly named, Foremost Foliage, Inc. is the largest U.S. supplier of tropical and semi-tropical starter material. The 10-year-old company imports and reships about 3000 boxes of offshore cuttings, vines, and air layers each week through its Miami warehouse. The company works with 20 farms in Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador to guarantee a consistent supply of foliage cuttings to its customers.

Foremost is part owner of one of these offshore farms with Follaje Ornamental de Costa Rica, a major producer of Hawaiian pothos, dieffenbachia, maranta, and dracaenas. “We’re very service and quality control oriented,” said Thomas Fennell III, national sales manager. “Part of the reason we own one of the farms is to be able to control quality and supply on some of our staple products.”

These “bread and butter” items have served the company well; last year Foremost Foliage’s sales were about \$10 million. But diversity and expansion will be critical to its continued success, noted Fennell.

Phoenix Foliage Broadens Scope

Six years ago Foremost acquired an interest in Phoenix Foliage, a liner production facility in Winter Garden. At the hands-on direction of president David Kirwan, this operation propagates foliage and other starter material. Foremost Foliage markets the cell packs and liners to growers throughout Florida and the U.S.

The majority of the starter plants are grown from tissue-cultured micro-cuttings. This plant material has been preselected for color, growth habits, and disease-resistance. Phoenix Foliage also propagates some material from offshore cuttings and produces a few products from seed.

“We’re one of the few companies that manages the product at all levels; off-shore production, supplying the offshore cuttings, and growing cuttings into liners. This gives us an added edge of being able to monitor the production and quality at all stages,” said Fennell. “We’re also one of the few suppliers that refrigerate plant material during the whole postharvest handling period.” Cuttings arrive in Miami on Friday and are delivered to customers on Sunday or Monday.

Like Foremost Foliage, Phoenix



Croton petras grown in Honduras at MATAS of Honduras, an offshore stock field for Foremost Foliage.

Foliage considers quality control a priority. Every liner is hand-graded for size and quality to make it easier for customers to pot the plants and finish them. The goal is to ship plant material that can be finished in eight to nine weeks, said Kirwan.

Meeting Market Demand

Production is a never-ending challenge, said Kirwan, “but our biggest concern is what’s happening with the market.” Phoenix Foliage and Foremost Foliage share responsibility for production planning, trying to project what the market will want. Both companies are trying to develop new products with good color, disease-

resistance, and quick growing times.

Testing new species and learning how to produce them efficiently takes money and time — perhaps a year or two, said Kirwan. New off-shore releases include liriopse, ophiopogon, hemerocallis, and scindapsus varieties. An Irish tissue culture laboratory is supplying Phoenix Foliage with eight new varieties of calathea. Foremost has obtained exclusive North American marketing rights to Spathiphyllum ‘Cupido’. The variety was developed by K.P. Holland, a Dutch company that has been able to produce seed from tissue-cultured plants. This spathiphyllum is Europe’s most popular, said Fennell, and the company hopes it will be a hit in the U.S., too.

While foliage remains the companies’ mainstay, they are turning to flowering and landscape plants. Phoenix Foliage is working on astreocarpus, commonly known as cape primrose, bred by Rex Dibley of Dibley’s Nurseries in Wales, and expects to offer several varieties on an exclusive basis.

Foremost is now affiliated with Dummen, a top German breeder of flowering plants. “Known for quality geraniums, poinsettias, New Guinea impatiens, and trailing petunias, Dummen brings a whole new line of products to our portfolio,” said Fennell.

A committee regularly reviews new product lines and Foremost actively works with its grower customers to test potential introductions. Although there seems to be some overproduction of finished product in the market, Fennell said the company hopes that outstanding new proprietary products like S. Cupido and the new flowering plants will generate strong demand. ■

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