

The Texas Superstar® Program: Success through Partnership

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Texas Superstar® is a marketing assistance program that involves the promotion of outstanding plants that have proven performance in most regions of Texas. From the beginning, this program has represented a partnership between the Texas A&M University Agriculture Program and the ornamental plant industry in Texas (Mackay et al., 2001). Only the most reliable and best-looking plants make the grade. The criteria for selecting a Texas Superstar® plant include: 1) must be attractive and useful to the gardening public; 2) must be unique and offer desirable and ornamental characteristics (i.e., the ability to perform in the heat of a Texas summer or pest resistance) not usually available in commonly sold plants; 3) must consistently perform well for most Texas consumers regardless of their gardening expertise and growing locations; 4) must be as pest resistant as possible (deer proof an added bonus); 5) must be able to be propagated and mass-produced in sufficient numbers to meet increased consumer demand;

and 6) preferably is so attractive in the sales container that it sells itself to consumers who have never heard of the many attributes of the plant.

Conservatively, Texas Superstar® marketing promotions have been estimated using informal surveys of producers to have resulted in \$15 million of increased sales at the major wholesaler level not including value-added components or smaller wholesaler production.

Texas is a climatic microcosm of much of the United States (Mackay et al., 2001). The state spans four U.S. Department of Agriculture hardiness zones, has 15 unique land resource areas and eight major soil orders, and has annual precipitation rates ranging from 8 inches per year in the far west to 56 inches per year in the far east. The trial sites for the program are in College Station, Lubbock, Overton, and San Antonio. These sites represent major differences in ecological zones near the vast majority of the population centers in the state. All decisions concerning plants selected for trialing or designated for promotion based upon trial site performance are made by the Texas Superstar® Executive Board. Members are: B. Pemberton (Chair), Texas AgriLife Research, Overton; M. Arnold, Texas A&M University, College Station; T. Davis, Texas A&M University, College Station; D. Lineberger, Texas A&M University, College Station; C. McKenney, Texas Tech University, Lubbock; D. Rodriguez, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, San Antonio; and L. Stein,

Texas AgriLife Extension Service-Uvalde. B. Pemberton directs the trial site at Overton. M. Arnold directs the trial site at College Station. T. Davis serves as an administrative liaison to the Executive Board. D. Lineberger maintains the website for the program. C. McKenney directs the trial site in Lubbock. D. Rodriguez and L. Stein direct the trial site in San Antonio. All of the Executive Board members are engaged in the search for new and unique plants for the program, provide research support when needed for production aspects of a promotion, and are involved in industry relations. In many cases, these efforts have been integrated into teaching and student research programs (Arnold et al., 2001).

The Texas Superstar® program grew out of regional marketing promotions coordinated by J. Parsons in the San Antonio region in the 1980s. From the beginning, these promotions of plants with proven performance were coordinated with industry to insure an adequate retail supply at the time of the promotion. In 1989, the first statewide marketing promotion was accomplished featuring the Texas bluebonnet. By the mid 1990s, the acronym CEMAP, which stands for Coordinated Education and Marketing Assistance Program, was used for the program. In 1997, the term Texas Superstar® was coined by the Executive Board. All promotions were retroactively designated Texas Superstar® plants. Texas Superstar® was trademarked at the time. Later, the trademark was registered, and the rights were assigned to the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station (now Texas AgriLife Research). In 1998, Texas Superstar® tags were first used; \$0.05 per tag sold was designated for the program. Horticultural Marketing and Printing (Mesquite, TX) helped develop the brand by donating artwork and the patent search. Wal-Mart (Bentonville, AR) purchased the first tags. The tag revenue is used to support all aspects of the program as approved by the Executive Board.

In the mid 1990s, D. Lineberger created the Aggie Horticulture website. The CEMAP Program folder was

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Units

To convert U.S. to SI, multiply by	U.S. unit	SI unit	To convert SI to U.S., multiply by
2.54	inch(es)	cm	0.3937

present on this site from the beginning. To place it into a historical perspective, Aggie Horticulture was among the first 10,000 servers to become a part of the World Wide Web. There are now over 273 million servers on the Web. In June 1999, the Texas Superstar® website (Texas Superstar® Program, 2011) domain was registered. In 2010, the Texas Superstar® website received 140,008 user sessions with 3,571,745 hits.

By the mid 2000s, changes began to challenge the viability of the program. Tag sales were declining and some key personnel left the program because of other pursuits, retirement, or health considerations. However, recent changes and additions to the Executive Board have helped the program remain alive and to begin a renewal of industry partnerships and a campaign to increase consumer awareness in the program. In 2009, the Texas Department of Agriculture greatly increased activity in partnership with the Go Texan Program. A Texas Superstar® brochure originally created in 1999 with the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association and updated every two years since that time was again updated and printed. In 2010, ads were placed online and in the regional magazine *Texas Monthly*, and stakes

and hang tags were made available on request to growers and retailers. In 2011, point-of-purchase materials were made available to retailers in addition to stakes and hang tags, and television and radio ads in English and Spanish were aired statewide.

In addition, a partnership has been formed in the work done by M. Palma and C. Hall of Texas A&M University. Recently, Collart et al. (2010) found that only 15% of the total consumers in Texas were completely aware of the Texas Superstar® brand. Consumers who are aware of the program considered the high temperature resistance, no pesticide usage, and the minimum soil preparation required as the best Texas Superstar® features. Of those aware of the brand, 88% said they were satisfied or highly satisfied and only 6% were dissatisfied with the product performance. They reported that they found out about this brand through friends or store displays. Of those aware of the brand, 84% exhibit a strong repurchase intention and suggested they would definitely or probably purchase again. The average respondent indicated a willingness to pay 10% more for a Texas Superstar® plant than for an unbranded plant.

Needless to say, there is much work to be done to raise consumer awareness of the program, but the brand is well accepted by those who are aware of it. The Texas Superstar® program started with partnerships and the future of the program is dependent on the continuing growth and strength of these partnerships.

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