

Delivered 4 times a year to MNLA members in the greenhouse, garden center and nursery business.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Best Performing Annuals/Perennials in 2003 1-3

Planning for Growth and Managing the Transition 3

The Search for Wild Gaura, Part 1 4-5

Dale Carnegie Course: Building and Maintaining High Performance Teams 5

Horticulture in Times of Climate Change 6-7

Kenaf Fiber - A New Basket Liner 7-9

How to Handle New Vegetative Cuttings When They Arrive 10

How Does Light Affect Flowering? 11-15

Garden Center Layouts That Work 15

Plan to Attend Minnesota Grown Marketing Conference 16

Best Performing Annuals/Perennials in 2003

Neil Anderson¹, Steve Poppe², Dave Wildung³, and Jill Pharis¹
Department of Horticultural Science, University of Minnesota¹ St. Paul,
²Morris, and ³Grand Rapids

This was a challenging year for annual trials in the north! June was a cold and rainy month, followed by a long drought period during July to mid-September. Collectively, these conditions provided opportunities to evaluate drought/heat tolerance. Overall, our annual trials were spectacular and a success for all three trial sites. The annual horticulture events at each site continued to draw hundreds or thousands of visitors, particularly home gardeners, landscape contractors, retailers, growers, wholesalers, and Master Gardeners. Throughout the growing season, all of the sites had a steady flow of visitors.

Below are the listings of the top 10 performers at all three of the Minnesota test sites. These performed the best throughout the growing season, with the highest ratings in their class. If you would like to see the trial data, as well as view photographs of this year's winners and the trials, please

visit our website at <http://www.florifacts.umn.edu/>. This information was presented around the state at the Bedding Plant Conferences, held in Detroit Lakes, Duluth, Rochester, and St. Paul. Your customers will be asking for these top-performing annuals by name next spring. If you haven't already done so, make sure your spring orders include the best for your area of Minnesota. Also, remember to grow or sell the new All America Selection (AAS) winners for 2004 which include *Celosia* Fresh Look 'Yellow', 'Red', *Gypsophila* 'Gypsy Deep Rose', Hollyhock 'Queeny Purple', Melon F₁ 'Amy', *Petunia* F₁ 'Limbo Violet', Squash, Winter F₁ 'Sunshine', and Watermelon F₁ 'Sweet Baby'. According to AAS, branded bedding plants outsell non-branded plants by ~40%. The AAS brand is a sure sell with name recognition throughout the country. Other annuals of merit that continue to receive favorable performance ratings include: Basil 'Golden Ruffles', 'Purple Ruffles';

Begonia (Hiemalis) 'Cindy Fringed', 'Fuga', 'Fuga Cream/Fayal'; *Canna* 'Tropical Yellow'; *Carnation* 'Can Can Scarlet'; *Geranium* 'Pinto Red', 'Orbit Orange'; *Hibiscus* 'Luna Blush', 'Luna Red'; *Impatiens* 'Dazzler Deep Pink'; *New Guinea Impatiens* 'Riviera Deep Salmon', 'Sweetie Pink'; *Gaillardia* 'Sundance Bicolor'; *Petunia* 'Ramblin Red', 'Blue Wave'; *Spilanthes* 'Peek-A-Boo', and *Verbena* 'Escapade Bright Eyes'.

We polled visitors to the St. Paul Display & Trial Gardens, asking them what their favorite annuals and herbaceous perennials were in the trials. Everyone's favorite annual was zinnia 'Swizzle Cherry & Ivory', which also was in the top 10 performers. The most popular herbaceous perennial was *Rudbeckia* 'Prairie Sun' with 'Katherine Woodbury' daylily coming in second.

Continued from page 6

ease. We have a novelty-driven market and the rapidity with which we must accommodate the new trends from Madison Avenue surpasses the speed of climate change.

How do we ensure market stability in a time of climate change? We can take a passive approach. We can rely on our confidence that the industry has the tools to handle this change and acknowledge that this change is no different than the normal tendency of new product development. The main benefit of this restful quiescence approach is that it allows us to respond with spontaneous actions that may be best suited to the unpredictable nature of climate change. Alternatively, we can assume an active role. We can attempt to determine which cultivars will benefit by the change in climate specifically for our region. Focusing on products that are suitable to the new climate may strengthen the confidence of consumers in our ability to develop products that can withstand changing times.

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Kenaf Fiber—A New Basket Liner!

Neil Anderson and Jill Pharis
Department of Horticultural Science, University of Minnesota

Kenaf fibers are derived from *Hibiscus cannabinus* (Malvaceae), native to Africa (W. Sudan), and grown throughout the world. In the southern U.S., Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi are major producers (Taylor, 1995). While Kenaf has been grown in Africa for thousands of years, in recent decades interest arose in its use as an annually renewable resource that is cheaper than peat moss (Taylor, 1995). Kenaf stem fibers are used in a variety of products, from newsprint, paper products, soilless potting mixes, oil absorbents, textiles, seeded grass mats, to insulation (Goforth and Fuller, 1994). Leaves of *H. cannabinus* are also food sources for humans and livestock. Kenaf, a relative of cotton and okra, is predominantly a short day plant (some day neutral types are used in Central America) with showy hibiscus flowers (Fig. 1) (Dempsey, 1975). There are ~50 tropical hibiscus species related to Kenaf, all in the Fucaria section of the genus.

Two types of fibers, bast (outer bark) and core (inner), are derived from Kenaf (Taylor, 1995). A special process, developed by Willett & Associates, mechanically

separate the bast and core fibers, since they are used for different products (Taylor, 1995). Core fibers are used as amendments in soilless potting mixes (Core Products, Charleston, MS). Recent studies have shown that foliage plants had superior size and increased dry mass when grown in a Kenaf:peat (70:30, v/v) mix (Wang, 1994). Bedding plants grown in this Kenaf:peat mix performed as well as in non-Kenaf peat medium (Reichert and Baldwin (1996). Cost comparisons also indicated that kenaf-peat soilless mixes were less expensive. Subsequent research showed that a 1:1 Kenaf:peat mix was a viable bark replacement for vinca production (Webber, et al. 1997).

Bast fibers—after retting (rotting or breakdown in water)—may be used to weave hanging basket liners. A new product, Scenic Home basket liners, is being woven using Kenaf bast fibers (ThinkMint, Inc., Northfield, MN; www.scenichome.com or www.thinkmint.net). This is a new use for the bast fibers, which have previously been used for mats, textiles, and secondary products. Kenaf is a new alternative to coco



Figure 1. Close-up of flowering *Hibiscus cannabinus* (left) and Kenaf harvest (right) (Taylor, 1995).

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

fiber liners. Kenaf is woven with a 100% recycled binder and cut into pre-shaped basket liners. Scenic Home liners can be readily inserted into wire baskets. Due to the thinner thickness of the Kenaf weave, they are easier to put into baskets (no leather gloves are necessary!) and cut to the desired shape. **The tight weave means smaller holes in the Kenaf, which could increase water-holding capabilities** and reduce irrigation frequency. Additionally, Kenaf is grown within the U.S., which means cheaper shipping costs than coco fibers and a consistent thickness due to the weave.

Coco fiber baskets are currently the commonly used material for wire hanging basket liners. They are made from 100% coir fiber, grown and processed in the Philippines. While providing a natural effect, coco fibers are very difficult to cut and place into basket liners due to their uneven thickness and tough fibers. In addition, **as you may have noticed after watering coco liners provide little water holding capacity.** Most of the water applied readily leaches out with insufficient soil moisture reserves in coco baskets during hot summer days.

We tested the potential use, water-holding capabilities, plant growth characteristics, and consumer preferences of the Scenic Home Kenaf fiber liners in a research trial this summer (2003) at the St. Paul Display & Trial Gardens. These were grown in 10 side-by-side (paired) comparisons with coco fiber liners (Cocoliner™, Austram, Durham, NC) in 16" wire baskets. Each paired set had the same cultivars (Table 1)



Figure 2. Examples of flowering hanging baskets comparing coco fiber and kenaf liners in wire baskets. (A) Coco liners (left) showed equally vigorous growth but less flower coverage of trailing petunias than kenaf liners (right). (B) A photo of some of the paired trials (the closest basket in each pair has a Kenaf liner).

and number of plants per basket. Each pair was hung side-by-side on double-hooked hangers in sun or shade. Data was collected on plant height, width, stem length, basket coverage (1-10 scale where 1=0-1%, etc.), dry (measured 24+hrs. after watering) and wet (measured immediately after watering) basket weights at monthly intervals after planting on May 23, 2003. Random consumer ratings were conducted during the summer by placing survey forms in the Display & Trial Garden information kiosk. Consumers answered the question "What type of hanging basket do you think is better?" and "Why?".

Results & Discussion.

Less assembly time and relative ease of liner placement in the wire baskets was noticeable with the Kenaf fiber liners. One cultivar (*Impatiens hawkeri* 'Sweetie Pink') in all baskets and was excluded from data analysis. In basket pair Nos. 1, 5-10 plant height was greater in the Kenaf liners (Table 1). Plant heights were highly significantly different for basket pairs ($P \leq 0.001$), liners ($P = 0.003$), and cultivars ($P = 0.005$). Plant widths and stem lengths were greater in the Kenaf liners for basket pair Nos. 1 (*Petunia* 'Lavender Wave' only), 2 (*Nemesia* 'Sunsation Peach'), 5 (*Nemesia* 'Sunsation Coconut'), and 6 (*Dichondra* 'Silver Falls'.) (Table 1). Plant widths, but not stem lengths,

were greater in the Kenaf liners for basket nos. 3 (*Phlox* 'Neon Pink'), 4 (*Catharanthus* 'Jaio Dark Red'), 6 (all cvs.), 8 (*Impatiens* 'Riviera Fire'), 9 (*Verbena* 'Rapunzel Pink'), and 10 (all cvs.). These width differences between cultivars and basket pairs were highly significantly different ($P \leq 0.001$), but liners were not ($P = 0.51$). Overall, mean stem lengths were greater, but not significantly different ($P = 0.34$), in Kenaf (24.2 cm) than Coco fiber (17.7 cm) liners.

Basket coverage was not significantly different between liner types ($P = 0.06$), although the basket pairs differed significantly ($P \leq 0.001$) which is most likely attributable to the plants included. Both wet ($P \leq 0.001$) and dry ($P \leq 0.001$) weights of the Kenaf liner baskets were significantly higher than those with coco fibers. Thus, it would appear that Kenaf retains significantly more soil moisture, which would translate into decreased irrigation frequency and water loss through the basket liner.

Consumer surveys showed a slight preference for coco fiber (56%) over kenaf fiber (44%) baskets, although the sample size was small ($n = 16$). Most visitors to the garden made verbal comments on the basket trials but chose not to take the time to fill out the survey forms. Positive

Continued on page 9

Continued from page 8

comments regarding the Kenaf baskets included that they were made in Minnesota and would be easier for assembly. Several participants commented that they liked the rough coco fiber appearance better.

This study demonstrates that Kenaf fiber liners are useful for hanging basket planting combinations for a wide variety of bedding plant species and may, in several instances, outperform coco fiber liners. **The most noticeable increased performance in flower coverage and vigor was with all trailing petunias.** Kenaf fiber liners were easier to handle and place in the basket frames. Further research

would be necessary before drawing conclusions on the particular advantages of Kenaf over coco fibers on plant growth, species or cultivar differences. Nonetheless, Kenaf fibers did not have any observable detrimental effects on basket appearance or salability. Growers and retailers should try these new products on a small-scale and determine basket performance in their growing environments.

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Table 1. Mean plant performance of bedding plants and basket measurements for 10 paired comparisons of kenaf and coco fiber hanging baskets, pooled over the summer 2003 collection dates.

Basket Pair	Cultivars planted	KENAF BASKETS					COCO FIBER BASKETS							
		Height (cm)	Width (cm)	Stem Length (cm)	Coverage	Wet Wt. (lbs.)	Dry Wt. (lbs.)	Height (cm)	Width (cm)	Stem Length (cm)	Coverage	Wet Wt. (lbs.)	Dry Wt. (lbs.)	
1	<i>Petunia x hybrida</i> 'Lavender Wave' <i>Verbena x hybrida</i> 'Royal Purple w/Eye'	23.0	75.5	63.0	7.5	9.3	13.3	16.5	67.0	49.0	8.5	9.0	11.2	
		22.5	42.0	30.0					14.5	43.5	34.0			
2	<i>Nemesia</i> 'Sunsation Peach' <i>Iresine</i> 'Purple Lady' <i>Argyranthemum</i> 'Butterfly Vanilla'	20.5	39.0	12.5	7.0	9.3	14.7	23.0	34.5	6.5	6.0	9.9	14.8	
		17.0	35.0	--z					8.5	17.5	-- z			
		33.5	33.5	--					35.0	34.5	--			
3	<i>Nemesia</i> 'Sunsation Banana' <i>Phlox intensia</i> 'Neon Pink' <i>Capsicum annuum</i> 'Explosive Ember'	21.0	51.5	36.5	9.5	11.7	15.6	23.5	60.5	42.0	9.0	9.6	12.9	
		26.0	54.0	22.0					20.5	50.0	26.5			
		20.0	16.5	--					24.0	30.0	--			
4	<i>Nemesia</i> 'Sunsation Cranberry' <i>Petunia x hybrida</i> 'Pirouette Red' <i>Catharanthus roseus</i> 'Jaio Dark Red'	17.5	62.5	30.5	9.0	10.8	12.1	22.0	66.0	33.5	8.0	9.6	12.7	
		31.5	29.0	7.5					30.5	43.0	22.5			
		23.0	24.5	--					26.5	20.5	--			
5	<i>Nemesia</i> 'Sunsation Coconut' <i>Nemesia</i> 'Sunsation Lemon' <i>Angelonia angustifolia</i> 'Carita Purple'	23.0	60.5	27.0	8.0	12.2	15.9	21.5	55.5	25.0	9.0	10.4	13.9	
		26.0	43.0	24.5					26.5	57.5	14.5			
		44.0	24.5	--					34.0	27.0	--			
6	<i>Begonia x hiemalis</i> 'Fuga Cream' <i>Impatiens hawkeri</i> 'Sweetie Pink' <i>Dichondra argentea</i> 'Silver Falls'	31.0	22.5	--	5.0	11.7	14.3	24.0	21.0	--	3.0	7.8	9.3	
		0.0	0.0	0.0					0.0	0.0	0.0			
		6.0	16.0	67.0					5.0	15.0	74.5			
7	<i>Petunia x hybrida</i> 'Surprise Cream' <i>Pelargonium</i> 'Rocky Mountain White'	19.0	52.0	40.0	8.0	9.1	11.5	16.5	57.5	41.5	8.5	8.9	11.0	
		28.0	30.0	--					26.5	32.0	1.0			
8	<i>Impatiens hawkeri</i> 'Riviera Fire' <i>Impatiens wallerana</i> 'Accent Apricot' <i>Impatiens wallerana</i> 'Accent Coral Star'	20.0	18.0	--	8.0	10.6	12.0	16.0	16.5	--	6.5	11.5	13.5	
		29.5	25.0	--					23.5	35.0	--			
		28.0	43.5	--					33.0	57.5	--			
9	<i>Verbena x hybrida</i> 'Rapunzel Pink' <i>Fuchsia x hybrida</i> 'Shadowdancer Violet'	18.5	27.5	6.5	5.0	9.9	12.7	14.0	15.5	6.5	4.5	8.4	10.3	
		18.0	18.5	--					18.5	27.5	--			
10	<i>Verbena x hybrida</i> 'Lanai White' <i>Diascia</i> 'Flying Colors Trailing Red' <i>Lobelia erinus</i> 'Laguna Sky Blue'	23.5	46.5	26.5	7.0	7.8	10.6	14.5	34.0	28.0	6.0	7.8	9.3	
		20.0	44.5	25.5					13.5	37.0	20.5			
		17.5	36.5	11.0					14.0	31.0	15.0			

¹Upright-growing plants were not measured for stem length cascading over the basket rim.