

Pierre Bennerup

A colorful second-generation nurseryman, Pierre Bennerup of Sunny Border Nurseries has been an influential figure in the use of perennials in American gardening.



BY ALLEN BUSH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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Above: At Sunny Border Nurseries in Kensington, Connecticut, tender perennials such as *Pentas* 'Graffiti Violet' and 'Ruby Glow' and *Angelonia* 'Spreading White' await shipment. **Above right:** Practicing what he preaches, Sunny Borders co-owner Pierre Bennerup prepares to add some new perennials to his home garden.

TODAY, DIVERSE selections of herbaceous perennial plants growing in colorfully branded containers are a familiar sight at any nursery or garden center, but it wasn't always that way. Flash back to 1960, and if you went to a nursery looking for a perennial, you would likely have had a choice between three or four bareroot plants languishing in two-quart wooden baskets.

The person who came up with the idea of selling perennials in containers is Pierre Bennerup, co-owner of Sunny Border Nurseries, a wholesale company in Kensington, Connecticut. The breakthrough was just one of many attributed to the energetic 79-year-old Bennerup, who is widely regarded as an innovator and visionary in the American nursery industry.

According to peers, he has an uncanny knack for anticipating and implementing new trends in the production and marketing of perennials, grasses, vines, and herbs.

"I firmly believe that the perennial industry would not be where it is today without Pierre," says David Culp, Sunny Border's vice president of sales and marketing. "His leadership and passion for plants have made him an icon in the perennial industry as well as in American horticulture." Culp, who has worked with Bennerup for 20 years, is also a garden book author and a noted hellebore breeder.

Colleagues and friends describe Bennerup as intelligent, sophisticated, and opinionated. "Pierre is witty and has such a great sense of humor about the work that we do," says Maryland nursery owner and ornamen-

tal grass expert Kurt Bluemel, a longtime friend. “If you’ve ever read the annual letter in his catalogs over the years, you know exactly how clever this horticulturist truly is.”

FAMILY LEGACY

Bennerup is a second-generation nursery owner. His father, Robert Bennerup, was born in Denmark at the turn of the 20th century. He immigrated to the United States in 1923 at the age of 20 and found

home in Norwalk, Connecticut. Fifteen years later, Robert Bennerup bought 135 acres and a house near Kensington for \$18,000. Sunny Border Nurseries has been there ever since.

Notable gardeners and horticulturists often relate heartwarming tales of their childhood experiences with plants, but not Bennerup. “I’m not sure I was born with an interest in plants, but my father was a landscape designer and nurseryman,

Looking for an excuse to stay in the Bay Area, he took a job teaching 7th and 8th graders at the Menlo School in Atherton, California. Looking back, Bennerup recalls he was a constant target for the pranks of the adolescent boys. “There wasn’t a day that went by that they didn’t figure out some way to torment me,” he says.

Teaching didn’t strike a chord any more than law. In 1969, the restless 35-year-old Bennerup moved back east and settled in New York City.

RESCUING THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Bennerup may not have been born with a love of plants, but the nursery business seems to have been ingrained in his DNA. Robert Bennerup died in 1967 after a long illness, and two years later, Pierre purchased the struggling nursery from his mother. At this point in his life, he embraced the challenge of owning his own business and was motivated to make the nursery more successful than his father had.

Initially, however, Bennerup wasn’t able to make a living from the nursery, so he signed on as a salesman with Banfi Vintners. The New York-based company obtained the North American rights to Riunite, a varietal of Lambrusco that in the

1970s became a blockbuster success with the catchy marketing jingle: “Riunite on ice, that’s nice.” Finding his niche as a salesman and marketer, he worked his way up the company ladder, eventually becoming corporate vice-president.

For the first decade of his operation of the nursery, he acknowledges being something of an absentee owner, returning to Kensington on

weekends to weed, ship orders, and do the books. Because of that, he had to find and train capable staff to run the nursery.

One of Bennerup’s first hires was Marc Laviana, who as a 15-year-old was brought on part-time in 1969. “If I worked hard after school, Pierre told me, I could work the summer,” Laviana recalls. Laviana, who started working full-time in 1974, was an integral part of Sunny Border’s operations during the phenomenal growth in consumer demand for perennials that started in the 1980s. “Pierre’s vast experience



Above: Five-year old Pierre Bennerup strikes a pose in his parents’ Victory Garden. **Right:** An early view of Sunny Border taken not long after it was founded in 1929 by Pierre’s father, Robert Bennerup.

work, first as an estate gardener and, a short time later, as a nurseryman. He met his wife, Claudia Audet, a French Canadian, while she was working as a governess in Westchester County, New York. When winter work was scarce in New England, Robert went south and sold flowers door to door in Miami, Florida. His education and skills eventually attracted the attention of some well-known landscape designers, including Beatrix Farrand. Robert later named a dianthus ‘Beatrix’ in her honor.

The first Bennerup nursery was founded in Tuckahoe, New York, in October 1929, two weeks before “Black Friday,” the beginning of the Great Depression. In 1933, Pierre was born a few miles away in Bronxville, New York. One of his first memories, as a three-year-old, was his father’s backyard pansy crop at their new



so I was required to pull weeds when I was a kid,” he says. “I hated it then, although now I love doing it.”

A bright student, he became the first graduate of Connecticut’s Berlin High School to go to Princeton University, where he majored in English. If you ask him about his lack of formal training in horticulture, he’s proud of the fact his expertise came through hands-on learning and reading.

After Princeton, Bennerup briefly attended law school at the University of California before deciding it wasn’t for him.

in sales and marketing has changed the course of the industry and Sunny Border, too,” says Laviana, who is now co-owner and president of the nursery. “He’s always been an innovator with new ideas. I’d call him a strategist visionary and then some.”

In the early 1970s, perennial plants were primarily sold bareroot. Wholesale growers such as Walters Gardens in Zeeland, Michigan, and Springbrook Gardens in Mentor, Ohio, grew hundreds of acres of perennials in sandy soils and shipped nationwide to mail-order firms. In turn, the firms put their inventory into

mand for foundation plantings created by the boom in home construction following World War II. The soil in that area of Connecticut is a clay loam, ideal for producing balled-and-burlapped yews, but not for perennials, which couldn’t be dug after rains as quickly and easily as they could in the sandy soils of Bennerup’s bigger competitors.

With the market for perennials expanding in the 1970s, Bennerup needed to come up with a solution. It was at this point that he decided to take the digging out of the equation and grow plants in

“People who buy fine wines are often the same as those who buy perennials. They are experimental, always trying different things, not always Budweiser or red geraniums.” By the mid-’80s, the popularity of perennials was soaring and sales at Sunny Border were growing exponentially.

UNITING PERENNIAL GROWERS

Some entrepreneurs are content to simply enjoy their own success, but Bennerup saw value in helping his fellow perennial plant growers succeed as well. “Pierre has always been an advocate of



A recent aerial photograph of Sunny Border shows the extent of the nursery’s expansion since Pierre Bennerup assumed its operation in the late 1960s.

coolers until it was time to ship in spring and fall. Perennials such as moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*) and evergreen candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*) were field-dug, thrown into two-quart wooden baskets, and placed on sale in retail nurseries, but few other perennials had the durability to withstand that kind of rough handling.

In the ’50s and ’60s, Sunny Border had converted a large part of its operation to field-grown production of yews (*Taxus × media*) in order to meet the huge de-

mand for foundation plantings created by the boom in home construction following World War II. The soil in that area of Connecticut is a clay loam, ideal for producing balled-and-burlapped yews, but not for perennials, which couldn’t be dug after rains as quickly and easily as they could in the sandy soils of Bennerup’s bigger competitors.

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horticulture—willing to share his knowledge with colleagues—and potentially competitors—in order that the perennial industry may continue to be advanced,” says John Walters, chief executive officer of Walters Gardens. “He has put the greater industry ahead of personal gain.”

A perfect example of this is Bennerup’s role in founding the Perennial Plant Association (PPA), which is now an influential industry group with more than 1,200 members in North America and overseas.



1998. He was also instrumental, says Still, in the establishment of the PPA's Perennial Plant of the Year program.

Bennerup also has been active with state horticulture groups, serving as founder and first president of the Connecticut Chapter of the Hardy Plant Society and as president of the Connecticut Horticultural Society.

SETTING—AND BUCKING—TRENDS

As a wholesale nursery, Sunny Border sells to independent garden centers and directly to landscapers. Bennerup's guiding philosophy is that foliage—not flowers—is the key to successful gardens and landscapes. He elucidated this in the letter he wrote in his 2013 catalog, under the theme "Green is a color, too." Taking issue with what he terms "lipstick landscapes," Bennerup stated, "I believe a good perennial garden is mostly foliage—various shades of green, bronze, silver, and gold. It's soothing. It's cooling." He adds, "Flower color in the garden should be savored in small portions like dessert. Too much color causes garden obesity."

This approach bucks the trend set by many other wholesale nurseries and greenhouses, particularly those catering to Big Box stores. Bennerup says these companies have streamlined their offerings with a focus on two primary criteria: short and in-flower. If plant pots can't

Left: In his home garden, Bennerup backs up his philosophy that perennials should be valued as much for their foliage than they are for their flowers by showcasing combinations like this one of *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', *Heuchera* 'Molly Bush', and *Hosta* 'Great Expectations'.

The idea of forming a trade group for perennial plants took shape in 1983 during a perennial plant symposium held at Ohio State University (OSU) in Columbus. The conference was organized by Steven Still, who was an OSU horticulture professor at the time. Among the participants was Bennerup, who gave presentations on propagation by cuttings and container production of perennials at Sunny Border. The symposium was a huge success, with some 250 people in attendance.

At the end of the meeting, Still says, about two dozen attendees got together

to "lay out what a new association would look like." Bennerup and three other perennial-nursery owners—Aine Busse of Busse Gardens in Minnesota, Jim Beam of Sunbeam Farms in Ohio, and Jim Kyle of Spring Hill Nursery in Ohio—agreed to meet again a few months later. Each put up \$250 to cover office supplies, stamps, and printing costs to get the new organization up and running. The PPA was incorporated late in 1984, and Still became its first executive director. Bennerup served as president for two years in 1986 and 1987 and received the PPA's Award of Merit in

be squeezed on a shipping rack in full bloom, there's a growing chance you're not going to see them sold in the Big Boxes at all. "They're promoting a fallacy," says Bennerup. "You can have a wonderful garden without any flowers."

He wonders aloud why anyone would want to watch a mass of annuals all season long. "The idea of different plants blooming at different times is the miracle of nature and gardening," he says. "Unless you appreciate that miracle, you'll never be a gardener." Of course, his preference is for people to rely on perennials

to create ever-changing bloom throughout the season.

An unabashed purist at heart, Bennerup estimates that only about one in 10 people have the knack to become a gardener in the way he defines it. “Perennial gardening is about subtlety, form, fragrance, texture, calm, and sometimes even sound and motion; in fact, all the senses, not just sight,” he says. “Will everyone buy into this? Absolutely not! But all we need is to appeal to that constant percentage of discerning, dedicated gardeners. If we set the tone, they will follow and so will others.”

NOTABLE INTRODUCTIONS

Of the many noteworthy plants that have been introduced by Sunny Border, perhaps the best known is *Veronica* ‘Sunny Border Blue’, a sturdy hybrid of *Veronica subsessilis* that Robert Bennerup discovered in the late 1940s. By the time the younger Bennerup took over the nursery, however, the signature plant was no longer being grown. After doing some detective work, Pierre located a plant and reintroduced it in the early 1980s. It was named the PPA’s 1993 Perennial Plant of the Year and remains popular today.

Other popular introductions have included purple coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.) such as ‘Kim’s Knee High’ and ‘Mop



Among the many perennials introduced by Sunny Border is *Echinacea* ‘Kim’s Mop Head’, a compact, white-flowered selection of purple coneflower.

Head’, ‘Stairway to Heaven’ Jacob’s ladder (*Polemonium* sp.), *Knautia* ‘Thunder and Lightning’, and several new *Coreopsis* hybrids bred by Darrell Probst.

Bennerup benefits from a keen eye for potential new plants, notes Steven Still. “A

good example of that is his introduction of *Dianthus* ‘Feuerhexe’ (Firewitch),” says Still. “He saw it in flower on an excursion in the Netherlands, procured it, and brought it back to the U.S. It later became the Perennial Plant of the Year.”

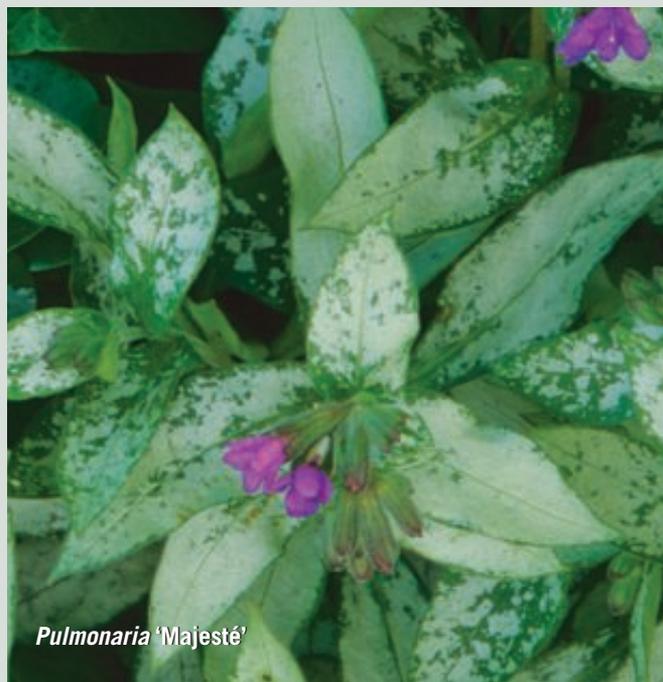
In recent years, Bennerup has become excited about the promise of “tender perennials”—generally subtropical plants that are not frost hardy. He coined the term “temperennials” and Sunny Border has introduced a line of them under the marketing name Bodacious Temperennials™. “I like the big stuff like bananas and brugmansias,” says Bennerup. “I also like succulents—agaves, aeoniums, and phormiums.”

Bennerup has a friendly rivalry with the woody plant and annual growers he competes against for scarce disposable spending from gardeners. He likes to tease tree growers that they’re raising cordwood. A neighboring bedding plant grower in Cheshire, Connecticut, called perennials “glorified weeds.” Pierre responded by comparing perennial enthusiasts to consumers of fine wine. “Annals are for beer guzzlers,” he countered. Yet he also doesn’t hesitate to infringe on the opposition’s turf when an opportunity presents itself. In 2006, he discovered and introduced a variegated basil called

A FEW BENNERUP FAVORITES

In addition to being a fan of perennials with interesting foliage, Pierre Bennerup says his favorite plant “tends to be whatever is blooming at the moment.” He does admit to affinities to certain families or genera, such as the primrose family, the ranunculus family, the genus *Epimedium*, the genus *Hakonechloa*, the genus *Saxifraga*, and the genus *Phlox*. Here are some of his favorite individual perennials, including a few introductions by Sunny Border.

- Athyrium niponicum* ‘Pictum’
- Actaea* (syn. *Cimicifuga*) ‘Brunette’
- Coreopsis* ‘Mercury Rising’
- Epimedium grandiflorum* var. *higoense*
- Geranium* ‘Rozanne’
- Hakonechloa macra* ‘Aureola’
- Heuchera* ‘Molly Bush’
- Pulmonaria* ‘Majesté’
- Tiarella cordifolia* var. *collina* and crosses
- Veronica* ‘Sunny Border Blue’



Pulmonaria ‘Majesté’



Above: This part of Bennerup's garden features *Rudbeckia maxima*, *Astilbe chinensis* 'Pumila', and *Macleaya cordata*. Right: Bennerup surveys his home vegetable garden.

'Pesto Perpetuo'. A quarter million of them were sold last year.

AT HOME IN THE GARDEN

Bennerup and his wife, Cheryl, share a three-and-a-half-acre garden at their home in Kensington. They have been married six years and Cheryl wears many hats at Sunny Border, including pest and disease oversight, writing and editing catalog copy, maintaining display gardens, and directing part-time students and interns.

I have been to their home many times, but until my most recent visit, I had not observed how Bennerup was putting his plant philosophy into action in his own yard. In the formal courtyard are shades of colorful and textural foliage: totems

of gray-green *Macleaya cordata* and the chocolate-maroon leaves of *Ligularia dentata* 'Britt-Marie Crawford'. There are also flowers, of course. The yellow flower-heads of *Rudbeckia maxima*, which resemble little sombreros, and the wispy lavender inflorescences of *Thalictrum rochebrunnianum* are the exclamation points. No doubt, colorful flowers will always be the money strokes, the fussy and ephemeral detail that breeders get so worked up about.

You can take the man out of the nursery, but you can't take the nursery out of the man. Even in the calm oasis of his home garden, Bennerup is still thinking about the future and anticipating trends. In his estimation, by 2025 80 percent of all perennials will be produced by three or four highly

sophisticated mass producers. "They will ignore 99 percent of possible plant choices in favor of 50 sock-'em-in-the-eye color selections," he predicts. Bennerup imagines that there will be a few conscientious nursery owners who will be left to supply the remaining 20 percent of the market. Tens of thousands of perennials will be up for grabs.

Guess which group Bennerup will be in. His 2013 wholesale catalog has nearly 3,000 listings, not including more than 1,000 in the Bodacious Perennials™ line. He expects Sunny Border to lead the charge for new introductions and continue to trumpet many of his old favorites for years to come.



For a man who hated weeding when he was a kid, he's come a long way. "I get so much enjoyment from gardening and plants," he says. "It's such a great gratification. We are connecting with the real world." I stop to scribble his words on my notepad, and when I turn around, Bennerup has disappeared into his woodland garden, still talking plants.

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