

TWYFORD'S NEW

Providing growth opportunities for Twyford, Berl Thomas is creating a color division and expanding the company's foliage program.



By Kris Sweet

They say it's hard to hit a moving target, and Dr. Berl Thomas is no exception to this rule. The new president and CEO of Twyford International Inc., Thomas will be spending equal time between the Apopka, FL, and Santa Paula, CA, offices, not to mention frequent trips to Costa Rica, Japan, and China. The whirlwind travel schedule is all part of his operational style.

The 60-year-old Thomas — who until two years ago was president and CEO of Speedling Incorporated and most recently owner of Berl Thomas and Associates Inc., an international agriculture-consultation firm — has no retirement plans in site. When it came time to make the decision to take the helm at Twyford, Thomas told Twyford's parent company, Kirin Brewery, that he was not a maintenance person. Instead, he would be working to take the company into exciting new areas that would utilize his vast international experience, which fit perfectly with the company's long-range goals. In just a few short months, the company is already on its way.

Tweaking The Traditional

Upon taking over leadership in January, the first thing Thomas changed was the company name. Twyford Plant Laboratories Incorporated is now Twyford International Inc. "Prior management had already set that company up, but it

was more of a holding company instead of an operational company name. The name was changed to emphasize a broader scope than just a plant lab," explains Thomas. "There's an image of a plant lab as being limited in its scope, and probably 95% or more of our product actually is sold as plant liners rather than as micro cuttings from a lab."

Thomas' next focus is on branching Twyford out of its traditional foliage-producing mode. A new color division will be launched within six months with product available in 2002 (although an unveiling will be held during the Ohio Short Course in July).

Annuals will not be added to the mix unless they are extremely unique and able to command a premium price. Thomas is not interested in low-cost, commodity-type bedding plants. "One of the true assets of Twyford is the storehouse of new products that are in the pipeline to be released. Prior management placed significant energy and resources in the development of new products and technology to create this base," says Thomas.

Twyford's color program is being developed from multiple fronts, including internal product development within Twyford and from parent-company Kirin, and from products available through Twyford's sister companies (see "The Twyford Family" sidebar). Brokers will sell the color division products primarily as liners to other growers.

Color Components

Part of the new color line will consist of flowering products from tissue culture, seed, or vegetative cuttings. Color division products (to date) will consist of Sweetheart primulas (with

Twyford International Inc.

Owner: Kirin Brewery Co. Ltd. of Tokyo, Japan

Locations: Labs — Apopka, FL; Sebring, FL; Santa Paula, CA (corporate headquarters); and Costa Rica. Nurseries — Apopka, Santa Paula, and Costa Rica

Employees: 250 to 400 at peak

Crops: Foliage, landscape, forestry, field and plantation crops, and new color products

Market: Primarily wholesale growers through Twyford and broker sales throughout the United States

TWISTS

The Twyford Family

double and semidouble flowers), tissue-cultured pot gerberas (heat-tolerant varieties), daylilies (evergreen, long-season blooming), calibrachoa (five varieties — two regulars and three minis), phalaenopsis orchids from either seed or tissue-culture, and Double Wave petunias (six vegetative double-flower varieties). Kirin breeds the primula, calibrachoa, and dianthus.

Kirin is also the developer of Wave petunias, which PanAmerican Seed and Benary Seed are licensed to market. In addition to petunia from seed, Kirin has developed six vegetative double-flower varieties to be marketed as Double Wave. Currently, Kirin is preparing license agreements for the Double Wave series in which Twyford will participate.

Thomas is focusing on creating and identifying products that are more unique than those currently available to the industry. Unlike some other breeders with production partners around the country, Twyford will also produce everything it develops. Product is being tested throughout the country to ensure adaptability.

Managing Multiple Markets

In launching the color line, Twyford is facing some internal challenges, such as space and production issues. Thomas and his management staff are currently reviewing needs for facility expansion to address both the color program and Twyford's expanding foliage program. "We will continue to offer and introduce new

foliage varieties as well as our traditional lines. We will have to expand both in Apopka and California, but we have adjacent property available at both sites in order to facilitate this," says Thomas.

Thomas' ideal is to turn Twyford into a one-stop shop by offering seed, tissue culture, and vegetative cuttings in order to represent multiple market segments. Twyford has not offered vegetative cuttings to date, except out of the Costa Rican facility in some foliage lines. Seed offerings will also be a new undertaking. However, according to Thomas, Twyford has already conquered the most difficult of the three — tissue culture.

"You only propagate by tissue culture if it cannot be done economically from seed or vegetatively, or if you want to select a particular, unique plant for cloning to create a mass population," explains



Where's Bob?

Robert Hartman, the previous Twyford president and CEO, retired in October 2000 to pursue another horticultural career. He is now involved with his old love — caladiums. Identifying a need to develop clean planting stock in the caladium industry, Hartman is working as the CEO and chairman of the board of Hendry Enterprises Inc. to improve the quality of caladium bulbs on the market. Twyford is working with him on production of virus-indexed caladium bulbs.

Thomas. Both seed and vegetative cuttings are typically less expensive than tissue culture.

Thomas credits the talent within Twyford for making these transitions and overcoming learning curves as they arise.

Numerous people have been with Twyford for many years, and according to Thomas, the company is set to introduce and market new varieties into the United States for years to come. ■

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The merger of some highly competitive, independent plant tissue-culture labs formed Twyford Plant Labs International in the early 1990s. Twyford originated in England and built the facility in Santa Paula, CA. The merger occurred with the acquisition of the Apopka, FL, site, which was owned by Weyerhaeuser (a company long since out of the plant tissue-culture business); the Sebring, FL, site, which was owned by Ciba Geiger; and the California site. According to CEO Berl Thomas, this created the largest tissue-culture company in the world, which later developed and added the Costa Rican site.

Owned today by Kirin Brewery Co. Ltd. of Tokyo, Twyford has a strong set of sister companies with which it will partner in developing and launching the color division as well as other new plant introductions. About 10 years ago, Kirin started making investments in other agriculture-related industries and formed a division called the Agribio Business Company. This company includes Twyford as well as sister companies in floriculture and flower trading — Barberet & Blanc S.A. in Spain, specializing in the breeding of carnation varieties; Fides Goldstock Breeding and Fides-Straathof Holding B.V., both in Holland; and Fidesplants in Costa Rica, specializing in mums, New Guinea impatiens, and dahlias.

Although Twyford does not own any other labs internationally, the company does contract out tissue culture in other countries and will be continuing to expand this activity.