

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

4/1/2024

Use Your Words

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

French novelist Gustave Flaubert always strove for the “mot juste”* and so do I. And so should you.

Say what?

Explains Wikipedia, “Flaubert believed in and pursued the principle of finding ‘le mot juste’ (‘the right word’), which he considered as the key means to achieve high quality in literary art.”

Well, there ya go!

Most of us—me included—tend to get lazy with our language, falling back on the same few tired adjectives instead of using our imaginations to broaden our vocabulary. This is especially true when it comes to plant descriptions—something we do every day, whether in a magazine like this, a blog, vlog or verbally to customers.

This becomes clear when I’m shooting new variety videos. My guests are describing the latest petunias, pansies and geranium, and yet despite the broad differences in colors, habits and uses, they all get described the same way: “You’ll love this great-looking new petunia/pansy/geranium! Loads of flowers, awesome foliage, big blooms, bright colors, lots of flower power, compact, vigorous, easy to grow, awesome for pots or the landscape. And the color ... wow! Awesome color!”

Couldn’t the trumpet-shaped flowers of the petunia offer a symphony of summer shades? The pansies smile up at us cheerfully, encouraging us to admire their delicate, sherbet-inspired hues? The sturdy geranium, in bold Bazooka Joe Pink ... well, you get the picture.

The idea for this column came from a recent stay at a Hyatt Place hotel where, in the elevator, I read a sign promoting their free breakfast. It featured an appetizing bowl of fruit-topped oatmeal and the words “Thoughtfully sourced, creatively curated” to describe their early morning offerings. Hmmm. Sounds good! Certainly better than “It’s free. And fast.”

You can take it too far, of course. There’s a cable TV show called “Beautiful Homes & Great Estates” that takes verbose verbiage to a whole new level. I jotted down some examples of the flowery jargon the host uses to describe the amenities of these eight-figure properties: “Savor the beauty and splendor ...,” “... seamless in their perfection,” “... evokes a feeling of timeless elegance,” “... an extravaganza of unparalleled opulence,” “... embodies the very essence of sophistication and grandeur,” “... adorned with impeccable appointments.”

Over the top? Yes. But it does drive home the point that these aren't just your ordinary mansions.

Back to flowers and plants, which are an excellent place to practice finding le mot juste. Here's how you and your staff can play at home: Pick something off the bench and gather everybody around. Ask them to shout out words that describe it. Jot them down. You'll hear the same ones. Tell them to dig deeper, really seeing the plant. Is the foliage green? Or is it emerald green? Or jade green, fern green, key lime or Irish Spring? The habit—is it compact? Or is it a bashful creeper, a playful ball of color, an ankle-high delight? Any fragrance? “Smells good” doesn't move as many plants as “its soft scent perfumes the evening air.”

Le mot juste is not about adding more adjectives to already weak adjectives. Mark Twain said of adjectives, “They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart.” Emerald green is nice. Rich, deep, jewel-toned emerald green is redundant. Your goal should be to paint a picture with a few good words, not lots of dull ones.

Here are some examples of le mot juste I found online—first the typical version, then the more descriptive: blue sky/steel blue sky, a beautiful woman/an elegant woman, a bright morning/a sunny morning, a long journey/a three-day journey. Easy, right? It just takes a tad more thought about the attribute you're trying to convey.

I've found le mot juste to be an effective communication tool for the simple reason that so few people take the time to do it. It takes time and a bit of energy to think about the subject more deeply and describe it more accurately. But when you do, promise me, folks will notice.

Give le mot juste a try the next time you're describing a new plant to someone or you're writing a bench sign or bit of web copy. If nothing else, you'll see your crops in a new light. For instance, that hibiscus flower you've been admiring? It isn't pinky orange, it's soft coral. **GT**

**Pronounced moe-zhoo for those of you adding it to your repertoire.*