Gardening has been about lifestyle!

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Bridget K. Behe, Ph.D., is a professor of horticulture at Michigan State University, where she teaches and conducts consumer research on marketing horticultural products. At the 2009 WESTERN, her speaking presentation "Surf's Up! Who's Online Buying and Looking for Information about Gardening?" provides useful information on who is searching and buying online and how to better connect with your customers through the Internet.

In my spring visits this year, I noticed more integrated merchandising than ever before. By integrated, I mean that retailers are showing customers how different plant combinations would look around their home, deck, or outdoor living space. I'm delighted to see that the message has gotten through to many retailers that their customers are shopping for a special part of their lifestyle. Still, I was surprised at the number of greenhouse and garden center managers—and not just in Michigan—who seem taken aback when you talk about today's gardening focus on outdoor lifestyle. I don't think for most consumers, the focus of their gardening activities really ever was the plants. For most people, I think gardening has been about lifestyle all along.

I can remember being in the garden with both of my grandmothers, both avid gardeners. For one, the garden was a place of respite. Her garden was a place to enjoy for the beauty. Yes, there was the work of gardening, but this work gave pleasure in its rewards: scents, sights, and sounds of nature. It was just outside the backdoor, that it gave her and me, a close retreat. That retreat was a significant part of her lifestyle for many years. For my other grandmother, the garden was a place reward, but also a tangible reward: fresh vegetables. Hers was not necessarily a place to enjoy, but provided a bountiful harvest to enjoy. Her take on the garden was different, but still an important part of her lifestyle.

From ancient to modern times, when people adapted their lifestyle, gardens went along with them. I remember studying Roman gardens, Greek gardens, then Italian, French, and English gardens. To each culture, the garden was something a bit different. I suspect gardening was a part of the lifestyles of the poor and affluent throughout the ages. How the garden was incorporated into their lifestyle changed over time, but it has always been a part of a lifestyle.

Today, we see more and more emphasis placed on lifestyle gardening. The lines between indoors and outdoors are blurred. Outdoor living spaces have replaced the front and back porch. We've changed from patios to decks to grand outdoor living spaces. We moved more furniture outside when decks became the norm. Now, kitchen outdoors seem all the rage. I see thousands of dollars spent not only on gas grills but on outdoor kitchens (amazing features, I will admit) to cook and entertain friends and family. Now, even big screen televisions are usurping the outdoor stereo system. It's easy to find displays and advertisements of these outdoor living spaces, but where are the plants? Gardening can and should be a part of that outdoor entertaining lifestyle.

Where are we missing the connection? I think we need to highlight the horticulture professional's ability to create outdoor living spaces. Walk through your local IKEA store and you won't see rows of sofas or bookcases (and you most certainly won't see merchandise grouped alphabetically!). You will see integrated groups of furniture. You do see sheets on the beds and plates on the tables! Why don't we take a cue from them and build more exterior facades and decorate them? Many retailers sell outdoor furniture and grills. Yet, we still don't see them integrated in an outdoor living setting. I know there are challenges with keeping inventory in saleable condition, but it may not be selling as fast because we don't give customers the context in which to buy!

Let's integrate some of those outdoor-lifestyle products into our displays. Can you make friends with a mason who's installing those outdoor kitchens and get him or her to make a display in your store? Can some furniture be incorporated into displays, rather than being its own distant display area? Can we invite a local chef into the store on a fall Saturday afternoon to give an outdoor cooking demonstration?

Hillenmeyer's in Kentucky has a great display facade that moves; it's a house front with a large porch on wheels. Any retailer could highlight any number of plants on this fixture. Imagine hanging baskets, deck rail planters, and many mixed containers adorning the freshly-painted fixture. It can be as simple as a door or a wooden deck portion, but make your fixture moveable and make it versatile. Holwerda in Michigan has a great deck ready for decorating in the store. It is a relatively simple fixture to make to show customers how to use the products. Make it easier for your customers to see your plants in their home. Create the display they want to buy and have in their backyard. It's a giant leap from a row of annuals to a decorated deck. Make the step a smaller one by showing some great examples in your store.

What about the lifestyles of tomorrow? Being the number geek that I am, I love demographic trends. We all know that the Baby Boomers are aging; the first one turned 60 last year. We all also know that the Boomer generation fueled the growth in horticulture during the last two decades. They made us a part of their lifestyle. As I've said in numerous talks, how this Boomer generation retires will affect our industry like no other population segment. They helped make us what we are today. They are responsible for building 8,000-sq.-ft. homes on 3,000-sq.-ft. lots. Will they retire in their starter castles or McMansions? Doubtfully. How they retire —yes, their retirement lifestyle — will affect our retail, wholesale, and production industries.

Gardening has been a part of many lifestyles over the ages. Horticultural professionals shouldn't let their love of plants obscure the enjoyment their customers want from turning their focus from the plant and onto the use of plants in their lifestyle. We need to give customers more examples of our products in a setting they can relate to. This will mean integrating furniture and other outdoor living fixtures into the gardens we want to create. Your customers' focus is on their lifestyles. Your's should be, too.