WHY PEOPLE VISIT A GARDEN CENTER IN SPRING VARIES

Who will you inspire?

SOME PEOPLE VISIT GARDEN CENTERS early in the year for a glimpse of spring yet to come and a hope (especially in Michigan) that it isn’t too far away. Some people come often, seeking an escape to the garden center’s warm and colorful world. Some people come later; pragmatists looking for an hour in a week when they can buy plants and get them home. Some people come just to look, while others come to shop quickly and return home. Some people bring their best friend or children or parents. Others prefer to shop alone. Still, some other people may come to buy, visiting a garden center for the first time, but may never return. Many people come, but what are they coming for?

Why do they come?

Ten years ago, I would have said people came to garden centers just to buy plants and to start planting their gardens. Today, that’s no longer the case. Yes, they may buy plants, but I believe they’re coming to garden centers for something else. Some come to escape, see the color and dream of green grass without snow. Those seed/plant catalogs (which some consider horticultural propaganda) may have arrived in the mail and already been recycled. Still, they come to see the color in person. Sure, there is color in between those catalog pages, but not much else. Some may have come to see the odd eye-catching support for taller blooms or the en vogue rain catcher, but probably not much else.

Maybe they visited a box store and found benches of plants, but it isn’t the same experience as shopping at a garden center. There are lots of plants at the box stores, but not many ideas on how to integrate them and make a container or garden. They may get some assistance, depending on the training and passion of the store employees, but more likely it will be a lonesome adventure through the aisles.

Many shoppers this spring aren’t looking as much for plants as they are for ideas. They’re not going to ask for inspiration — they’ll know it when they see it. But they may not come back if they’re uninspired.

Where are they going to find inspiration? I doubt they’ll find it at the box stores, but those savvy merchandisers are improving all the time. I hope they find inspiration in your business, the consummate professional who is not only great at producing superior products but a master at inspiring many to want to create “that look” at home.

Inspire your customers

How can you inspire your customers: good planning, a well-executed plan and a surprise or two.

Have you planned your display themes? A good display theme combines a variety of products to inspire customers to want to have the same combination, not just a group of plants.

You can use color as a theme (white or night gardens, hot color combinations) or wildlife (attracting butterflies or birds) or simply backyard relaxation. Plan to change themes at least every two weeks to keep customers from seeing the same thing each time they visit. They won’t think your store’s boring even if you only change the location of the displays. Give them one more reason to want to come back.

What products do you carry and what do you need to properly execute the theme? What can you use that is taking up precious inventory space that could be included in those displays? Remember, your customers want something fresh this year, even with familiar species/cultivars and colors. I’m sure you have some talented people working for you who are great at combining colors and textures. Why not give them an opportunity to shine by developing some pre-planned combinations you’ll feature or highlight in a display.

Set the customers loose and see what happens.

‘Big bang’ merchandising

How do you merchandise products for your store’s display themes? It may seem obvious, but most of what customers encounter in the first 10-30 feet coming though the door is not in their field of vision. It’s more like a functional landing strip that gets them in the door and guides them where they’ll want to go next.

Most customers look beyond the landing strip, more forward into the store to see where they want to go. Although you can line the landing strip with some colorful products, put your big bang items just beyond that strip to give them a focal point on which to target.
What's your big bang? That's the key point of the display or focal point of the store. Locate it beyond the cash registers and a bit farther back from where the line forms for your checkout registers. Here is where you want customers to say “Wow!” and find an idea they can relate to and want to replicate at home. That’s real inspiration. You can frequently hear that vacuum of air being sucked into the lungs of inspired patrons as they first lay eyes on the display. Other displays throughout the retail sales floor should supplement the main display with other related products or modifications of the theme.

Don't forget the surprise

What's the surprise? Maybe you offer a free five-minute massage chair or tomato seedling for your first 100 customers on a given day. Maybe on a not-so-busy day, you invite an aspiring chef to come in and demonstrate cooking with herbs. Maybe you give every 50th customer double points to your loyalty program. Maybe you have some seed and peat pot packets or balloons (the color of your theme this week) on-hand for small soon-to-be customers (children of your current customers).

Customers can see plants in many places and buy them from many types of retailers. We need to work more creatively to integrate our products into their lifestyle. People are looking for ideas and ways to create a look in their backyard. You can buy coffee at many places, so why choose Starbucks? Why not help people find inspiration so they’ll purchase plants from your professional place of business? People watch HGTV to see beautiful gardens around the world that sometimes inspire them to create or modify their own gardens. When customers see your displays, can they envision themselves relaxing or entertaining in a garden similar to this one in their own backyard? Give them something to aspire to.

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