

Cover Story

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Sitting on Inventory

Allison Westbrook

How do you integrate selling outdoor furniture with plants in a garden center? According to Kate Terrell, general manager of Wallace's Garden Center, "It kind of goes hand in hand. Most people that are 'gardening' right now are doing it in pots on their decks and patios. Why plant pots on the patio if you're not going to sit out there to see them?" So it's an obvious fit. But how do you best go about successfully selling outdoor furniture and not end up with stacks and stacks of unsold Adirondacks?

Give the People What They Want

Donna Moore, a sales representative at furniture company Ratana, says that motion pieces, such as swivel gliding club chairs, are very popular. She adds that many consumers are wanting bistro tables, along with some larger dining sets or deep seating. Customers also like to have seating around a fire pit. She says that for Ratana, contemporary is still the leading style, which includes gray finishes and fabrics, and different materials like woven resin, ropes and straps with aluminum frames.



Pictured: The Isola Island Dining Set from Ratana.

She also suggests that garden centers be sure to stock stacking dining chairs, as customers are always looking for more chairs.

"Make sure they're easy to stack, as customers like the idea that they don't take up room when they're not in use," said Donna.

Leslie Thompson, COO of Fermob USA, says their customers often like to have their outdoor furniture blend in with or complement nature. They offer five different green shades for that very purpose. She notes that sustainability is also a big trend in outdoor furniture.

Kate notes, too, that furniture trends change quickly. What's hitting right now?

"Right now, gas fire tables are huge, as are sectionals and lounge-type furniture to go around them," she said. "Also, anything made from poly wood or recycled plastic lumber and anything that is U.S. made, low-maintenance and long-lasting." She adds that dining furniture is waning in popularity, as people opt for lounge groupings and chat sets.



As with selling plants, busy times for selling outdoor furniture vary with weather and location. Kate advises that busy furniture sales often coincide with your busy times for selling flowers.

Pictured: Wallace's Garden Center General Manager Kate Terrell says that garden centers must incorporate plants (even if they're faux plants) to connect the furniture to planted spaces.

"Furniture may even kick off a little sooner. On those first early warm days, people get out their old furniture, get it cleaned up and then decide that they need something new. It kicks off in April and May, but is pretty steady for us throughout the summer."

Fermob's strongest selling season is March to July, however, some areas of the country consider winter to be their strongest selling season, says Leslie. They see sales throughout the year because many people buy early so they don't miss any of their outdoor season.

Front and Center

How does a garden center, so focused on plants, make sure not to treat furniture like an afterthought? A garden center must use displays to help people connect the two and get ideas, Kate says. Wallace's incorporates artificial plants, but tend not to mix real plants with their furniture displays, as it can be hard to properly care for the plants in that portion of the store.

Donna emphasizes that sales training for staff is very important.



Pictured: The Bistro Folding Table from Fermob.

"This way, your sales staff feels comfortable and knowledgeable when talking about the different outdoor furniture materials, finishes and fabrics," she said.

Selling outdoor furniture requires a different expertise than selling indoor furniture. Whereas consumers may have a strong idea of what they want in a sofa for their living room, they often don't know what they want in outdoor

furniture, Donna said.

A few topics employees can discuss with customers to be sure they're selecting the right product include:

- Making sure they have a goal for their space and its use (entertaining, shade, etc.)
- Budget
- Desired quality and materials
- Their climate and anticipated storage of the product
- How much maintenance they're willing to undertake

Kate adds that there are several factors to carefully consider before deciding to sell outdoor furniture. Space can be an issue, along with cost of entry into the market.

"Most of the time, getting into a line of furniture involves buying a container or a significant amount in order to get the best pricing," she said. "Without the best pricing, you can't compete with everything else that's out there."

"Our model for furniture is to buy in most of what we want to sell and sell it off the floor and out of our warehouse,"

she adds. "Some other stores may buy a few floor models and place special orders based on those floor models. Both can work, but we like the ability to have the customer pick something out and have it delivered that day."

Finally, she encourages anyone thinking about getting into selling outdoor furniture to attend the Casual Furniture Market at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago in the fall.

"This is a great way to see everything that's out there. We attend every year. It's generally a big investment that needs staff that's dedicated to learning the product and wanting to sell it." **GP**