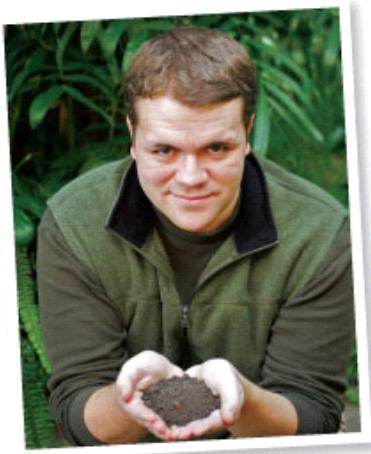


Columns

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GEN Y Gardening's Tipping Point

Kelly D. Norris



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In recent months I've carried the banner of my generation. I'm 23, a Master's degree student in horticulture, a nursery owner, and something of a blabbermouth when it comes to all subjects green and planty. Some have suggested to me that my focus on Gen Y entrenches the minds of many and concentrates the supposed shortage of gardeners too intently on one age group. That suggestion is absolutely true. But, without providing some numbers and a few trends, it's hard to get businesses that are deeply ensconced in the status quo to think creatively and innovatively. The hubbub about Gen Y has as much to do with a ripe-for-the-picking crop of new consumers as it has to do with us and our efforts to market the joys of gardening in ever more creative ways.

For the life of me, I can't get my neurons around a statement such as "I don't think Gen Y will go as far with gardening as other generations." Post that declaration online and watch the flack fly. The suggestion that something as magnanimous as gardening—an expression of humanity's innate agrarian urge known historically from the earliest of human civilizations—starts, stops and dies with any one generation of American consumers verges on the absolutely ludicrous. According to the National Gardening Association, 7 million people became gardeners in 2009. That's huge! Take that, naysayers!

And it's huge enough to make me believe we just may be at the tipping point for gardening in this country. Look across the pond to cultures in Europe and Asia. Though obviously examples of older civilizations, these cultures incorporate gardening into the very fabric of their identity. Gardening there is not just a hobby or something to blow a hundred bucks on over Memorial Day weekend. It's an expression of life, from the homeliest window box to the richest of garden borders. Gardening is socially acceptable and the right thing to do. Sure, that probably came with time. But it also came by understanding the philosophy of why people garden.

We need to spend some time figuring out what gardeners my age want, what they need and what they don't know they need. The worst tactic in this era of crowdsourcing is to surrender yourself to an audience who may not know what they need. That's like your least favorite professor in college asking for questions after a lecture that nobody understood. It's pretty hard to articulate your thoughts when you don't really know what they

are. We've got to inspire people to garden, promote sustainable gardening practices and mentor a fledgling group of dirt lovers.

We've also got to work on selling the process and not "stuff." If we just keep selling things such as containers, plants, tools, potting soil, whirligigs and so on, we're just selling stuff. If we sell gardening, an expression of earthy joy full of satisfaction and rewards, we're winning two-fold with return clients and cha-chings at the cash register.

Gardeners, especially those my age, not only need basic information and "stuff," but also a reason to care, an affirmation of the beliefs they have towards gardening.

So, let's think big—bigger than any one age group. Bigger than "Joyce" or "Bridget" or all those other internal demographic personalities that influence every move you make. Let's figure out why people garden. Our not-so-quixotic quest is to think about how gardening can be as casual as any mp3, as token as Starbucks, or as necessary as a cell phone. That's Gen Y hip. For some young gardeners, that'll mean some awesome tropicals and succulents on the balcony. For first-time homeowners, it'll mean crafting a versatile landscape that feeds stomachs and souls. Our industry needs to cater to that diversity in whatever forms it takes. Let's give people what they want and what they need—and inspire them to need something else! Shouldn't our garden centers inspire people to come back because of great products, great service and great ideas? If not, why are any of us in business? **GP**

Kelly D. Norris is a plantsman and M.S. student in horticulture at Iowa State University. When not running Rainbow Iris Farm (www.rainbowfarms.com), he's usually blogging at www.kellydnorris.com or potting up plants for yet another experiment.