

Features

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Our Future Depends on Potted Plants

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Think back to your first horticultural plant experience. You may have been fascinated by the colors and textures of your grandmother's begonia collection. Maybe Mom purchased a baby's tears plant for you or perhaps you bought a plant for your dorm room. Whatever it may have been, there's a good chance that experience was with a potted plant. And if you're reading this article in this magazine, then it's likely that first potted plant gave you the gardening itch you still keep scratching today.

That's exactly what all of us in horticulture want to have happen. From the breeder on through to retail, we all want the consumer's first experience with plants to be one that gets them hooked for a lifetime. Potted plants are positioned perfectly to do just that.



Pictured: With its small, prickly stature and outrageously vivid colors, the Desert Gems "painted" cacti program is winning with the new consumer.

"I call potted plants the 'gateway drug' to gardening," says Marta Maria Garcia, director of marketing for Costa Farms in Miami, Florida. "They are training wheels

for future gardeners. We try to target potted plants to the non-consumer, people who are not into gardening and to the Millennials—those who are not in our space now ... The way we package it, communicate it and position it is essential to attract people to continue with us." From a strategic standpoint, your potted plant department—from the philodendron hanging basket to the potted gerbera—may be what the future of your garden center hinges on.

Point of Entry

Because so much is riding on potted plants, it's not enough to shelve or hang these plants and hope that brings customers into the department to check them out. Communicating the beauty, simplicity and functionality of this category is key to get customers to take out their wallets.

“I’ve seen garden centers with different settings where they show tables for a garden patio or have it set up as a bathroom and they display orchids in a manner where the consumers would say, ‘Oh, this is what I could do with this product,’” says Marcella Lucio, vice president of sales and marketing for Silver Vase, Inc., growers of orchids and bromeliads in Homestead, Florida. “It has to be very visible [the ideas for how to use the product].”

Luckily, Marcella says, garden centers have the tools and the creativity to design displays that communicate visually how potted plants can be used in and around the home. “It comes from within each organization to see what tools they have and what works best to send a message [about potted plants] to their consumers.”

Plants With Benefits

What exactly are the messages about potted plants that we want to communicate to non-gardeners and new consumers? Marcella suggests that the message to consumers is that potted plants provide fresh pops of elegant color in easy-to-care-for plants—and the price is right.

“We’ve been able to create an interest in phalaenopsis because we’ve been able to produce them in a way that is more accessible to the market, price-wise, and the availability of them has allowed for creativity to start building around houseplants and how to decorate different spaces with them,” says Marcella. She notes that because orchids have become more affordable, customers and designers are grouping two or three together or with different plants to create small tabletop gardens. Add in the fact that orchids have such a long flowering period and they’re easy to care for, and you’ve got a successful and creative consumer ready to try her hand at using other plants. “Orchids continue to be exotic but not scary,” Marcella points out.

At Costa Farms, the potted plant messaging takes two directions. First, it’s the decorating aspect. In the retail space, Marta says, some of their customers allow them to adjust the space and merchandising to group the potted plants by decorating style. The second aspect is messaging about functionality.

“If you have a brown thumb, for example,” says Marta, “Our Plants of Steel are for you. We’ve collected indoor plants that could really survive anything. Or maybe you want a little pop of flowers in your home—potted floral like gerberas, African violets, etc.—instead of cut flowers. Orchids fill that void, as well. From a marketing perspective there are so many decorating theme routes to take.”

Not Your Grandmother’s Plant

The marketing messages we use should be messages that the customers want to hear—not messages driven by our own experiences. Take Costa’s “painted” plants as an example.

“Those painted plants have been amazing for recruiting the new consumer,” Marta says, noting that customers are grouping them by color, and mixing and matching different colors. “The avid gardener gets insulted when they see these plants, but for the health and vitality of our category, this type of product is necessary!”

The new consumer is seeing a painted plant as their generation’s take on plants. Innovations occur with other products in other industries to make life better or easier or happier for their customers. A painted plant is one such innovation.

Getting the Message Out

We know the messages we should be sharing about potted plants—now how do we communicate them? Both Marcella and Marta aren't convinced care tags are the answer.

"We've tried putting lifestyle shots on care tags," Marcella says. "Tags get lost and people really aren't looking at the care tag to get inspired." She adds that POP materials are good at communicating messages, but can be costly—and there's no guarantee retailers will use it.

Marta is a fan of packaging and thinks it would not only enhance the product, but also would add value. Plus, it gives you space to communicate all the benefits of the plant to the consumer. Costa Farms has been experimenting with printed pots for the Tropic Escape and Desert Escape landscaping programs. They've put garden plans on the packaging and are educating consumers on the concept of landscaping and container gardening via that packaging.

It's not a big leap to see how packaging may aid retail in communicating to consumers. And any added cost could be chalked up to investing in the industry's future. **GP**