

9/30/2015

Perennials: Model Behavior

Susan Martin

Perennials may have had their heyday in the early 1990s, but consumer interest remains and exemplary independent retailers continue to see strong sales in this category. How are they doing it? By establishing their own unique niche, tailoring their product selection to their local customer base and developing creative promotions. Notice that carrying the newest varieties didn't make that list. It turns out that "new" may be king at the wholesale level, but matters little to the majority of consumers.

Finding Your Niche

When a woman walks into an independent garden center for the first time, within about 10 seconds she has already formed an opinion, assessed the "cool factor" of the place and decided the likelihood of finding what she came in for. Harsh, but true, folks. What vibe does your store give off when you first walk in?

The six independent retailers noted here all do an outstanding job of communicating their niche—their unique selling proposition—which keeps their customers coming back again and again despite less expensive options being available nearby.

What's Your Angle?

Canadale Nurseries, Ontario, Canada—Inspirational Design Gardens. After a trip to South Africa in 2005, company president Tom Intven realized that North American garden centers lagged far behind in their merchandising skills. Upon his return, he set up 18 miniature gardens in the retail area of his nursery, including three home fronts, a zen garden and a landscaped fire pit. All of the inspirational design gardens are reworked seasonally making sure that all plants are labeled and plans for each garden are readily available. Many customers, especially new gardeners, visit these displays first to get ideas, then bring the design plans to the retail area where they select their plants.

River Street Flowerland, Kalamazoo, Michigan—A destination garden center filled with unique varieties. This place is a plant geek's paradise, brimming with an enormous selection of hard-to-find, new and newer perennials like Astilbe Chocolate Shogun and Hibiscus Cherry Cheesecake. Yet to their average local customers, they're just a friendly neighborhood garden center that carries beautiful blooming plants. Despite having one of the best selections of perennials in the state, the store's vibe is unpretentious and very shoppable. Their happy customers often leave with a cart full of must-haves.

Tagawa Gardens, Centennial, Colorado—Educating and inspiring customers. Before ever setting foot in Tagawa Gardens' retail store, the fear factor has already been lessened for many customers who have been exposed to their products through local garden clubs, numerous social media platforms, a large variety of how-to videos on their website and year-round classes at the nursery. Though they do host seasonal events, Tagawa Gardens doesn't need to offer steep discounts to get people through their doors. People want to shop at this helpful retail nursery that offers relevant products like pollinator-friendly perennials and Plant Select varieties, which are trialed and introduced through their local Denver Botanic Gardens.

Sheridan Nurseries, Ontario, Canada—Solution-based merchandising. Customers don't have to worry about having a bevy of perennial knowledge when they shop at one of eight Sheridan retail locations. The stores' solution-based merchandising takes all the guesswork out of it. Perennials are merchandised by categories—like drought tolerance, all-summer color, attracts butterflies and birds, among many others. Going one step further, the plants are merchandised by color, complete with color-coordinated pots and banners, to make it incredibly easy for customers to find the plants that suit their needs in the colors they prefer.

Chalet, Wilmette, Illinois—Engaging customers year-round with a broad selection of higher-end products. No matter what time of year you visit, there's always something new happening at Chalet. Through special events, workshops and their diagnostic center, Chalet's staff is constantly engaging their customers. This isn't the kind of place where shoppers stop by just to pick up a perennial or two. Their store layout encourages customers to explore and discover delightful nooks filled with impulse items, like a spring blooming hellebore in full bloom, an expertly designed combination container or a well-made pair of new work gloves.

Gethsemane Garden Center, Chicago, Illinois—Quirky vibe with a personal touch. To afford this kind of real estate, you have to be exceptional. Located just a few blocks from downtown Chicago, Gethsemane Gardens occupies two full city blocks with walls painted in vibrant hues, their benches always overflowing with colorful, well-grown annuals, perennials and shrubs. This place has the "cool factor" in spades; customers can feel it from the moment they step out of their cars or off their bikes. A number of customers have turned into staff; attracting and keeping good help is never an issue at Gethsemane. Gardeners help gardeners here and they know all the tricks to gardening in the Windy City.

How Many is Too Many?

When it comes to perennial selection at retail, there doesn't seem to be one magic formula that fits all, but there are a few principles that are working for successful retailers. Contrary to what many consultants advise, retailers report that having a broad selection is what keeps customers coming back for more and customers aren't happy when their options are limited. Some retailers reported that after narrowing their selection for a few years, they've now gone back to carrying more varieties at their customers' request.

There also appears to be some correlation between plant selection and a garden center's location. Whereas urban garden centers tend to have more clientele looking for specialty items, rural garden centers tend to carry a broad selection of standard perennials to entice customers to make the trip out to their one-stop shop. Additionally, retailers located in harsher climates are sometimes reluctant to carry new varieties until they've proven to be reliable in their conditions.

Profitable Promotions

Unlike always-in-color annuals, sometimes perennials need a little extra promotion to keep them moving. Native perennials can be particularly challenging to display given their shorter bloom times. This year, Chalet partnered with their local garden club to develop and market Pocket Prairie Gardens at the nursery, which significantly boosted their sales of native perennials, especially to customers looking to support pollinators. Classes at their Ed Center, as well as helpful shopping guides available in the retail area, were geared towards helping suburban gardeners create these small pockets of native perennials in their landscapes.

How do you get customers to camp out in front of your retail garden center for hours before you open your gates in late August? You host a Firefly Sale, of course. River Street Gardens is busier than a Saturday in May each year during this highly anticipated sale where customers shop from 7:00 p.m. until midnight under twinkling Christmas lights. Everything is on sale and the discount grows with each passing hour. An incredible amount of inventory is moved during this event, so much so that shopping carts have to be borrowed from other area businesses to accommodate all of their guests. It's no wonder this garden center is known for its creativity and fun atmosphere.

New is Nearly Invisible at Retail

Look in the front of any wholesale perennial catalog and the first thing you'll see are the new varieties. New is king at the wholesale level, but is surprisingly inconsequential at retail. Every retailer interviewed for this article, albeit a small sample, reported that only a tiny percentage of customers come into their retail stores asking for what's new. New varieties are rarely, if ever, signed—even though the benches are filled with them.

While “new” may sell at wholesale, color sells at retail. Well-grown, blooming plants that appeal to impulse buyers are what move. Customers make the majority of purchasing decisions right there in the store. So forget what's new and focus on beautiful, reliable plants that look great on your retail benches. They'll sell every time. **GP**

Susan Martin specializes in horticultural marketing, content generation and management, working with green industry clients in trade and consumer sectors. She can be reached at gardenersuesnews@gmail.com.