

## Features

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### Dare I Say, En Fuego?

*Jennifer Polanz*

If you were a sports fan in the mid-'90s, you just read that headline in the voice of Dan Patrick. A little Sportscenter flashback, if you will, but highly appropriate for our subject. Fire pits and grills, aside from the obvious pun intended, are continuing their popularity as an evolving category. Many garden centers have diversified to include products that encompass the ultimate patio and that includes a Weber or Viking grill, a pizza-oven or even a Big Green Egg.

Consider this fact: 37% of consumers plan to purchase a new grill or smoker in 2016, according to the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association (HPBA). By and large the favorites are gas grills, with 62% of Americans owning one, followed by charcoal at 53% and electric at 12% (wood-pellet grills are quickly rising, too, with 7% planning to purchase one this year).

These products aren't just for the dog days of summer, grilling out on the Fourth of July anymore. The HPBA says 61% of grill owners enjoy using their grill or smoker in every season, and 43% cook at least once a month in the winter months.

Turning to the fire pit side for a moment, these products, too, can be used year-round. However, it's looking like the trend is moving away from heat-generating wood-burning fire pits in favor of the less smokey, propane-fueled fire tables. Let's take a quick look at how retailers can differentiate on both sides of the fire equation.



### **Fire Pits: The Experience Matters**

It's all about the experience when it comes to fire pits and their newer counterparts, fire tables. Folks want to be able to have a memorable experience roasting s'mores, chatting or having a peaceful glass of wine fireside.

"We're seeing propane really becoming a fuel of choice," notes John Johnston, Retail Education Manager at Griffin Greenhouse Supplies, a distributor that offers fire pits through a drop-ship program. "The fire pits that are being sold are geared toward deep-seating arrangements. We're seeing more and more offerings of a different look."

It's those different looks that are the key for independent retailers, too. A wide selection is something the box stores have great difficulty in offering, as well as a variety of accessories. And considering propane is now a popular choice, retailers have the option of becoming a propane refilling station, bringing customers back in a few more times a season. It also can help to sell those deep-seating sets, since they'll need somewhere to sit while enjoying their new fire table or pit.

### **Barbecues: It's in the Accessories**

Well, that's not entirely true. The grills themselves are a solid product line, but the repeat business—as is so often the case—is in the accessories. Everything from tools, aprons, wood chips, rubs and sauces, it's a category that can continue to grow and bring customers back for repeat visits. John recommends exploring the Stonewall Kitchen line of rubs and sauces, too. The brand has an almost cult-like following and can be found in higher-end retail and grocery stores. It has a vast selection of products, so retailers can always bring in new or unique offerings to give customers something new to look at (and taste).

Also, if you're making the investment in square footage to sell barbecue grills, don't forget to fire one up and appeal to your customers through their stomach.

"Last year, our store decided to sell barbecues, and we often go to Costco, buy some meat and cook it on our demo models," says Kristen Bussee of Greengate Garden Centres in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. "We've also done some plant exchanges where we give plants, at a discounted price, to a restaurant owner and in return he comes and cooks for us. It's a great way to advertise both businesses."

It's beneficial to get customers who are looking for a grill into your store, too. Back to those statistics from the HPBA, they found consumers are far more likely to buy a grill or smoker in store (83%) versus online (11%). Do try to impress them with your accessories section while they're making that grill purchase, too, because nearly half of all grill or smoker owners own the most basic grilling accessories and many plan to purchase more specialized accessories in the year ahead, including a pizza stone (14%), fish or broiling basket (14%), cedar or other cooking plants (14%), motorized rotisserie (12%) or grill woks (11%).

"You want return footsteps," John says of the barbecue department. "It's a return category that you hope keeps on giving. There's got to be another hook." **GP**