greenPROFIT

Features

1/31/2017

Trends: Vertical Gardening: What's on Your Wall?

Paris Wolfe

Your customers type "vertical garden" into a Pinterest search and are overwhelmed with charming displays of botanical beauty. Flowers, herbs and vegetables are elevated in collections of hanging mason jars, repurposed pallets and gutters, as well as ready-to-install displays and frames. What once was a window box is now a Hanging Garden of Babylon.

Vertical gardens have grown in popularity because they're visually pleasing and add real estate to a small footprint. They may be used as a decorative fence or function to hide blight. They're also more accessible for some folks with physical handicaps that limit bending or stooping.



Their modern incarnation is either American or French, depending on the definition. Stanley Hart White—brother of literature's famed E.B. White—was a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Illinois in the 1930s when he created "botanical bricks" in his backyard. These were basically blocks that could be planted and built into a vertical structure.

Pictured: This outside vertical garden is from Think Outside, a company created by artist Aaron Jackson, which makes all of its products out of recycled oil drums.

The concept, perhaps, didn't catch on until 1988, when French botanist Patrick Blanc introduced a dramatic "green wall" at the Museum of Science and Industry in Paris. Now the application is exploding.

While the field lacks a technical definition of vertical garden, according to Karen Kennedy, educator for The Herb Society of America in Kirtland, Ohio, "A vertical garden is any garden that's not horizontal. It could be chicken wire around a pillar or a living wall. A vertical garden brings your eye up from a design standpoint and creates green where you may not be able to have a shrub."

No matter. “Vertical gardening is here to stay,” says Adlai Kunst, owner of Woolly Pockets in Kansas City, Missouri. “Not only do they create a healthier indoor environment, they look beautiful and can add an element of style to any room or outdoor space. Vertical gardens are a great way to add greenery to unexpected places and are useful when floor or yard space is limited.”

The timing is right for Adlai’s Woolly Pockets and many others to hit garden centers and retailers. “As many people downsize their homes and apartments, or embrace urban gardening, they are looking for creative ways to bring the outdoors in and create a natural environment,” Adlai says. “A vertical garden is the perfect space-saving solution.”

Knowing the needs of these gardens makes it easier to help shoppers collect the right resources.

Contain It

The container depends upon the grower’s vision. They may need lumber and hardware, mason jars and clamps or simply ready-made planters.

Several companies offer shadowboxes that look like picture frames. Pride Garden Products makes them with finishes of copper, black zinc, wood and gray wash. BrightGreen’s GroVert does much the same while providing an online tool to create a virtual garden and visualize the real thing. Recently seen at AmericasMart in Atlanta, Think Outside, a company created by an Australian artist, showed an outdoor vertical garden made from recycled oil drums.

Some ready-to-wear frames come with a fiber or fabric liner designed to retain dirt. For others, shoppers will need to add landscaping material to their shopping cart. Plastic and plastic-fabric holders like Woolly Pockets are another option.

For those looking to grow vegetables in a small space—even indoors—Opcom’s GrowFrame is a soil-free alternative. It’s packaged with sponges, nutrients, lighting—everything needed to grow up to 33 plants.



Pictured: Woolly Pocket products can be used inside or outside to add plants to any area.

Getting the Right Mix

Save customer energy by recommending a soil mix that holds moisture. “Any time you raise soil off the ground, you have to consider soil type and volume,” Karen notes. “Some people use soil with moisture-absorbing additives that stay moist. Even with all of that, the vertical garden will need more watering than something in the ground. The smaller the pocket the plant sits in, the more often it will need to be watered.”

The Plants

Vertical gardens look best with a variety of colors and textures. Color can be as simple as different color foliage or variegation.

“Succulents do extremely well,” says Deborah Oesterling, vice president of sales at Pride Garden Products. “Herbs do well. Anything that’s low growing. You wouldn’t put an aggressive petunia in them. The objective is the look. If the plant gets overgrown, you won’t see the frame.”

She also recommends annuals, such as bedding begonias and impatiens. Or low-growing herbs that are regularly harvested, such as thyme, oregano, bush basil and sprawling rosemary.

Those recommendations are, of course, when the container is part of the scene. Sometimes, containers aren’t a focal point and aggressive plants may be the goal.

Adlai encourages talking to customers before suggesting plants. “The type of plant depends on the space and the climate. Every environment is different, so pairing plants with the light and water available is very important,” he says. “Once you know where the vertical wall will go, you can talk about what plants are right.”

While different displays take different plants, for pockets, Woolly Pockets recommends developing a lush mix from the start. These include:

• Spillers—Draping, creeping ivy

• Thrillers—Statement plants like orchids

• Fillers—Fill in spaces and help cover the planter

As a retailer, you might want to create your own Pinterest board of vertical gardens or a real bulletin board to inspire customers to take their gardening efforts upward. **GP**

Paris Wolfe is a freelance writer and blogger from the greater Cleveland area. She can be reached at pariswolfe@yahoo.com.