

Cover Story

12/1/2021

What's In Style? You Are!

Jennifer Polanz



Take a deep breath. Now slowly exhale. You're the popular kid, the nice one everyone wants to hang with. It's OK, you can smile a bit about that. It's been a hard road to get to this point.

It's important because you've been a staple in your community, some of you for a very long time, and now you're getting the recognition you've always deserved. Industry consultant Ian Baldwin recently conducted a virtual presentation for Arett Sales, in which he talked about that feeling: "One thing that came from COVID—one of my clients said this to me—one thing we learned last year was that our customers—the community—thinks a whole lot more of us than we ever thought they did. I didn't say we took them for granted, but we just had no idea how much they really valued our part in this community."

I talked to Tom Birt, owner of Mesquite Valley Growers Nursery in Tucson, Arizona, who was kind enough to let us take our cover photo at his renovated nursery (if you've been to an industry trade show, you may recognize him from his trademark white cowboy hat). He's not one to relish the spotlight, but it warms his heart to hear the joy plants have brought people of all ages in his nursery the last two years.

"It's just rewarding. Fifty-three years of work has created something that's special," he says about his store's newfound popularity. "Just knowing, watching the smiles, people complimenting how much fun it is, just makes my day. We're blessed to have the opportunity and I thank God for the common sense to fight through all it took to get here.

"It's just nice to see them enjoy it. I don't need kudos; I just need to see the smiles—that's all it takes."

While nothing lasts forever, we have some reason to believe this popularity could continue into 2022. Let's take a

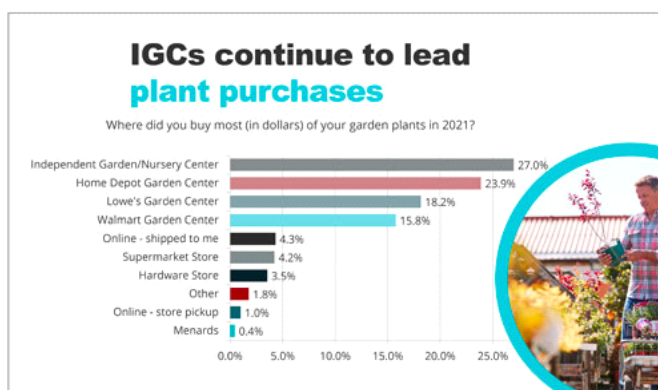
look at the statistics.

Pictured: Head Grower Guadalupe Velarde and Madelena De Leon, graphic artist at Mesquite Valley Growers Nursery in Tucson, Arizona, helped us with our cover shoot to illustrate the surprise and joy of being discovered by millions of new gardeners. Thank you to both of them!

Facts First

Let's talk home sales. This year saw low inventory, labor shortages, material prices going sky high (lumber, anyone?) and bidding wars all over the country. However, according to a recent Washington Post story, homebuilders expect supply chain issues to subside in mid-2022 and inventory to increase, giving more opportunity for home buyers to find the right place for them. A monthly index of home builders conducted by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) also shows home builders very optimistic about the next six months.

Short answer, more new homeowners means more opportunity to sell new landscapes (woot!). Now, let's talk about those existing customers who already visited you over the past two years.

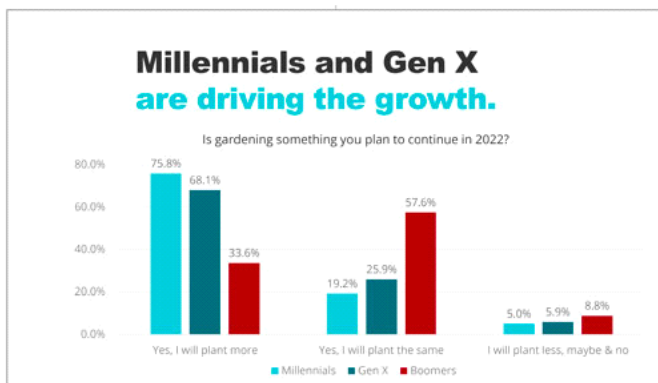


Axiom Marketing recently surveyed more than 1,300 people about their purchasing habits related to gardening and found some really positive gains. The biggest one? More than 62% said they would plant MORE in 2022 than they did last year, and more than 31% said they would plant the SAME amount (meaning, with a little marketing savvy and impulse displays you might be able to convince them to increase their planting). Only a little more than 6% said they would plant fewer plants.

On the downside, only about 28% said they would increase spending, so there's a bit of a disconnect there between planting more and spending more, which retailers need to be aware of and market accordingly. Might I suggest appealing consumers with all the health, wellness and emotional benefits gardening brings with it? What kind of price tag can you put on your well-being?

Who Are They & What Do They Want?

Who's doing all this gardening? You can probably tell based on the visits to your store last year, but it's not just our previous loyal customer of the Baby Boomer woman. It's Millennials and Gen X who now love plants. Tom has seen the shift at his store, too. Five to 10 years ago you'd be hard pressed to see strollers around his store. Today is a different story.



"Now almost daily we see baby buggies," he says, adding part of the renovations included new paved walkways and paths that receive compliments for their ease of use all the time. "We also see elderly being pushed in wheelchairs and middle-aged parents. It's everybody."

In a statistic that made my heart sing, nearly 22% of these gardeners told surveyors they look to independent garden centers for information on new plants and products, while 18% look to box stores and mass

merchants and 14% look to websites. That means the training is going well, and garden retailers can continue that

effort with educational videos, in-person events, social media posts and website content.

Next Steps

This is where we get into the weeds. As Ian said in his talk, work on what you can control. You can't control supply chains, so work on your pricing strategies, your labor costs and efficiencies. As I was writing this, monthly inflation numbers were on the rise, and one Associated Press story quoted economists predicting inflationary increases through 2022. One of Ian's recommendations included raising prices on some products and discounting others, knowing you made enough last year to give a little this year.



Now, let's talk about labor.

For this, I interviewed Suzanne Kludt, owner of [HireHorticulture.com](https://hirehorticulture.com), a company that helps place horticulture workers and recruit for horticulture companies. She's seen first-hand how the labor market has changed, and says retailers have an opportunity to build strong teams that will take their businesses into the future with The Great Resignation (where Americans began quitting their jobs at historic rates), if they're willing to take it.

"We won some and we lost some on that," she says. "The message I was trying to tell everyone is to pay attention—if we're not paying attention, we're going to lose out on this."

When she says pay attention, she means to focus on your messaging when it comes to hiring. Office workers are tired of sitting in an office all day; entice them with a message of working outdoors in the fresh air. Restaurant workers (who are often hard workers and used to being on their feet all day) are quitting because of low pay and hostile customers. Show them they'll be treated better and can enjoy working in a hobby they love.

Competitive pay moves the needle, as do benefits. Work environments, positive employee cultures and flexible scheduling all matter. In fact, a recent general retail webinar I watched showed the top three employee demands were: starting salaries, scheduling flexibility and incentives/bonuses.

Suzanne also pointed out that cross-training and collaboration among teams was key to helping provide flexibility. "Those that were really progressive said, OK, we're going to have collaborative management and team management, so they would share roles," she adds. "People became really vested in the team because they were all working at the same level to the same goal. They had each other's back."

What else works? Get creative with your employee titles—make your salespeople Education Specialists or Plant Nerds. I've also heard titles like Chief Daymaker or Chief Happiness Officer. Of course, hiring and referral bonuses work, too, along with promoting your ties to the community and showing potential employees how you give back.

Raising the Bar for 2022

While there are some unknowns that will change the look of 2022, namely labor, inflation and supply chain issues, it seems the basis is there for as successful a year as 2021. Industry consultant Sid Raisch laid this challenge at this year's Garden Center Group Fall Event: Raise the Bar.

"Then, to raise the bar, how are you going to move to that higher level? What's in between (the base and the bar) is



Scan the QR code with
your device's camera to
view consultant Ian
Baldwin's presentation
for Arett Sales about
approaching 2022.

the plan. Who will be there with you and how will you get there?"

What's in between are all the things you can control. Good luck, and see you on the other side in 2022!

Houseplants as the Gateway

When I interviewed Tom Birt, owner of Mesquite Valley Growers Nursery in Tucson, Arizona, he was finishing up a 9,000 sq. ft. houseplant section that was four years in the making, including a tree in the center where orchids and tillandsias will be displayed. He saw the trend coming and wanted to give customers the feeling of being in the plants while they're shopping. "We had a fairly nice houseplant area, but I wanted to do this and expand it to make it really, really spectacular," he says.

The trend doesn't show much sign of slowing down, based on a recent survey of 1,100 Americans by Craftjack. (Scan the QR code to see the full results.) Here are some highlights:

- 81% who don't have much access to nature say houseplants make that easier
- 63% of respondents under 40 say their houseplant collection increased during the pandemic
- 61% of those under 40 agree "pets are the new kids and plants are the new pets"
- 41% have posted a picture of their plant on social media
- Most creative plant names—No. 1: Keanu Leaves

Retail Options to Consider

Ideas to consider offering heading into 2022:

- More pre-orders to secure popular items
- Subscriptions or curated box offerings
- Seasonal container insert replacement program
- Vacation-oriented services or education
- Carefully selected online products
- Seasonal décor packages
- Round up sales for a charity of your choice **GP**