

Features

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Greening Your Garden Center

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Sustainability in the garden center is more than a token solar panel or a biodegradable pot line. It often becomes a custom math equation—a unique combination of local solutions, plant mixes, hardgoods and operational procedures. It's adding up the good things and chipping away at the not-so-good.

Pictured: Heeman's Garden Centre in Thorndale, Ontario, installed six electric vehicle charging stations, which are powered from the energy generated by the solar panels.

Consumer Demand

The 2021 Global Sustainability Study found that worldwide 60% of consumers rated sustainability as an important criteria for their purchases. Moreover, in the last five years 79% of U.S. consumers indicated that they've made changes in their purchasing behavior to be more sustainable. As a group, Millennials lead the charge here, with 33% of those surveyed globally saying that they will always choose the sustainable product when it's available.

Time and again, surveys show that when consumers are looking for sustainable solutions they're not just looking at the product itself. They're looking to support brands that do the right thing, that support good causes and are conscientious of their own environmental footprint.

The Big Picture

For many garden centers, much of sustainability is also about doing the right thing. Our industry provides products that can benefit the environment, and it only makes sense that we also improve our operations and footprints in concert with, rather than against, that effort.

Peter Mezitt, president of Weston Nurseries in Massachusetts, states, "Our company is entering our 100th year. Our industry needs to be better stewards of the earth."

Kris Bryan-Kjaer, owner of Broadway Terrace Nursery in Oakland, California, says, "We want to be on Team Nature."

Let's look at a few of the common elements that some garden centers are pursuing.

Reducing Water Use

There are lots of easy methods to reduce water usage, but many businesses are also opting for more complex systems that recapture and reuse their water.

In California's drought-stressed environment, saving water is more than just good environmental practice, it's a required part of surviving as a horticultural business. With both a water retention pond and a recycling system, Frantz Garden Center in Hickman, California, has reduced water consumption by 25%.

Sheridan Nurseries in Canada, a retailer that also has growing operations, built a 30-million-gallon pond system that collects water and run-off from their growing operations via a series of settling ponds.

At Weston Nurseries in Massachusetts, they recycle water through a catch basin system that drains back into their ponds. Plus, by using drip irrigation, they can cut water usage by 80%. The entire system was designed to draw from the ground water as little as possible, says Peter.

Saving Energy

An energy audit can identify ways to save energy—from installing LEDS to motion-sensor lights and looking at ways to reduce your heating bills—via thermostats, energy curtains, more efficient heaters and so on. All things that, in the long run, should save money, too.

But for those focusing on their environmental footprint, renewable energy offers a significant way to offset their carbon footprint. In 2021, Heeman's Garden Centre in Thorndale, Ontario, installed solar panels that they estimate can offset over 60 tons of carbon each year. The 264 panels supply more than half of their energy needs. (Heeman's also recently installed electric vehicle charging stations at their location.)

Frantz Garden Center has a large on-site solar installation with 1,800 photovoltaic panels that can meet about 90% of their energy needs. Frantz's also has a wholesale nursery, so their entire operation—greenhouses, garden center, pumps and offices—is included in that calculation. Customers can click a link on their website to see real-time metrics on the solar system—including daily energy produced, as well as lifetime energy, along with how many tons of carbon they've offset and examples of what that equates to (such as gallons of gas, hours of operation at a local coal plant and number of electric cars charged).

For many garden centers, the issue of energy and becoming net zero is the most intimidating change. But it's on the minds of owners like Peter at Weston Nurseries, who says, "We haven't done enough, but we will be in the future in terms of generating electricity from solar."

Hot tip: If you're looking into a renewable energy setup, there are some good financing options and grants out there for U.S. businesses, in addition to the tax incentives. The Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) provides both loans and grants to small rural businesses. There's also a program called Property-Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) from the Department of Energy that finances renewable energy and energy efficiency upgrades. For example, Otten Bros. Garden Center and Landscaping in Minnesota used the PACE program to finance a 40-kW solar array that can offset about 80% to 95% of their power.

Pots & Recycling

Traditional plastic pots, while reusable or recyclable in some scenarios, often get lumped into the single-use plastics category. For consumers paying attention, plastic containers remain the most notable downside of the plant industry.

For one, horticultural pots are difficult to recycle—many local recycling companies won't take them. And often growers and retailers find themselves jumping through hoops trying to find a company who'll take them. East Jordan

Plastics is one such supplier, and they go the extra mile to drive and pick up loads of pots, as well as certain types of tags and bench cards, from growers and garden centers.

Both Home Depot and some Meijer Garden Centers will collect pots for consumers, recycling through East Jordan Plastics. And several independent garden centers also offer this option. At Weston Nurseries, they accept pots from their customers and a recycler picks them up.

But many retailers have been seeking out ways to change the type of pot they're using. Maypop Coffee & Garden Shop in Webster Groves, Missouri, created a "No Pot, No Problem" program, which features a selection of plants available in Ellepots rather than conventional plastic pots. At Heeman's Garden Centre, they've been trialing coconut coir pots in their production area, and also try to reuse as many of the plastic pots and trays.

Let's Talk Compost

In the produce world, wasted fruits and vegetables have a big environmental footprint and the food industry in general has rallied around reducing food waste. So what about plant waste? How many plants end up in the compost pile because they didn't sell or they looked a little ragged? At Broadway Terrace Nursery, they created a 50% off section stocked with plants that would otherwise be headed to the compost heap. As a result, they have a much better throw-away rate.

At Weston Nurseries, their compost is a selling point, literally. They've been selling their own compost for over 30 years, and it's certified for use in organic production, so consumers can be assured it's free of contaminants.

What's Your Social Impact?

There's more to sustainability than just the environment; social impact is a key pillar. It can be as simple as paying your employees a living wage and providing a good work environment. It can also mean giving back to your community—helping local nonprofits and supporting causes you care about.

"BTN is a woman-run and owned business," Kris says of Broadway Terrace Nursery. "We see gender and race equality as core values, and we work hard every day to encourage diversity, equal opportunities and defeat stereotypes." They support nonprofits that align with their values and make an effort to raise awareness about social issues.

More Solutions

For many businesses, reducing plastic and waste is simply a matter of getting their employees involved and looking for small things to change. Sheridan Nurseries, which has eight retail locations across Canada, is in the process of replacing their single-use plastic bags and trunk liners with recyclable paper this year. They also switched to pot stickers on all their branded annuals, eliminating the use of about 500,000 tags a year.

Garden centers that have food service as well can key in on compostable and plant-based products for coffee cups, lids, straws, utensils and such. Heeman's offers on-site composting and recycling bins for their customers.

What About the Plants?

Garden centers go to great lengths to showcase the sustainability of plants. For many, it's about focusing on the ecosystem services that plants provide—whether it's because of their benefit to pollinators, their drought tolerance or native status.

The big change for Weston Nurseries is that after having gotten out of growing about 10 years ago, they're starting to get back into it with native perennials and woodies in order to sell a new brand of native plants called Weston Rewilding at their garden centers.

“We’ll have templates for how to create a native garden,” says Peter. “And we’ll be providing the installation of these gardens as well.”

For Peter, he personally wanted to steer their garden center in that direction. “You have to have these native corridors and support these indigenous flora and fauna,” he says. But he also notes that his customers want to see it, especially the younger generation.

For Weston Nurseries, a large part of their sustainability equation is where they source their plants from.

“We’re 80% green goods,” says Peter. “And so sourcing them from local suppliers is really important. We want to minimize bringing them in from across the country.”

For other retailers, it’s important to communicate how the plants have been grown—without neonicotinoids, or in some cases, without any pesticides at all. Harlequin Garden in Colorado is one such garden center that hangs its hat on their plant selection, with this as their policy on pesticides: “All the plants grown at Harlequin’s Gardens are pesticide-free. All the plants that are custom-grown for Harlequin’s Gardens are pesticide-free. Our vegetable and herb starts are organically grown. Some of the plants we purchase have been treated with pesticides, but never with neonicotinoids. All plants at Harlequin’s Gardens are maintained organically.”

Hard Goods Count, Too

Every product you source says something about who you are as a business. For Broadway Terrace Nursery, that means carrying pottery from local artists who focus on sustainability. In the last year, they’ve also “removed harmful pesticides and chemicals from their sales inventory and drastically reduced the amount of plastic in the store.”

A number of garden centers we talked to have very specific strategies for working with their suppliers, buying in products and having a product line that makes money, represents their ethos and has a positive impact. Stay tuned for next month: In Part 2, we’ll cover more about sustainable inventory for your garden center. **GP**