

Features

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Gardening Success: It's in the Bag

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In Northeast Ohio, the soil can be notoriously clay-like. It's a real drag for local gardeners, but there are solutions that can help. That's where Chris Bauswein and his team come in.

Chris is the garden center manager at Lowe's Greenhouse (no, not that Lowe's, an independent garden retailer) in Chagrin Falls, and he has a host of tools at his disposal to help his customers out.

"That's why we carry products like Bumper Crop and Sweet Peet," he says. "Because it helps—especially Bumper Crop—it helps with loosening the clay soil and

getting organic materials in the ground, which is beneficial for every kind of plant species."

It's the ingredients that do the trick. For Bumper Crop Soil Builder, sold by Master Nursery Garden Centers and formulated by Coast of Maine for the eastern portion of the U.S., that means ingredients like lobster meal, compost, aged bark, kelp and worm castings, along with two kinds of mycorrhizae. Sweet Peet, meanwhile, is a garden mulch with ingredients like biochar carbon, blood meal, cow manure, worm castings and other organic products. For the western half of the U.S., Bumper Crop Soil Builder is made by E.B. Stone and has bat guano, composted chicken manure, kelp meal, earthworm castings and aged fir bark.

Chris has been at Lowe's for around 12 years, and they've been selling Bumper Crop organic products since before he got there, but now they sell exponentially more. Part of the reason for that is they've reduced their offerings to avoid SKU confusion, so customers know what's recommended by Lowe's.

"We've been educating people on the products, offering that as 'this is the product you need' instead of 'you can do this one, this one or this one,'" he says. "We help make the decision for them."

Tie-ins and Promotions

Pat Flaherty, vice president of sales for Master Nursery Garden Centers (MNGC), which is a co-op only for independents, says members like carrying Bumper Crop organic products because they're OMRI- or CDFA-certified (depending on location) and they can generate upwards of 65% margin.

MNGC offers marketing materials, too, like tri-fold brochures that can be handed out to consumers or kept at the

register for customers to pick up, as well as lots of other assets that are available on the Master Nursery dealer website (including training and certification opportunities for retail associates—you can read more about that in the fertilizer-focused story on page 22, if you didn't already).

Pat recommends bundles to make sure customers get the right start with their plant purchases, including a starter fertilizer, soil and soil amendments that can help create the right planting conditions. Those offerings can be tied in to a plant guarantee, too.

For example, Bedner's Farm & Greenhouse in McDonald, Pennsylvania, offers a 1-year tree and shrub guarantee as long as the customer also purchases a minimum of one bag of Bumper Crop Soil Builder and one bag of Bio-tone, and all items have to be on the same receipt.

At Wilson's Garden Center in Newark, Ohio, the guarantee is automatic at one year for trees, shrubs and fruit trees, and 90 days for evergreen azaleas, perennials, roses, grapes and berries. However, customers can extend that guarantee to two years for the former group and until the end of the season (October 1) for the latter by purchasing the 1-2-3 Program. That's a bag of Bumper Crop Soil Builder, a bag of Bumper Crop Starter Fertilizer, and Bonide Root & Grow Root Stimulator and Plant Starter.

These are ways retailers can help encourage customers to give their plants, trees and shrubs the best possible start in the ground.

Pictured: Flamingo Road Nursery in Davie, Florida, stacks the Bumper Crop right up front so customers can't miss it on the way in.

Offering customers a checklist can be helpful, too, especially when they're attending classes or workshops. Chris at Lowe's says they often include products in their classes to let customers know what they recommend and how to use them. Those recommendations also happen on the social media channels and through their enewsletter.



Additional Products & Resources

There are a wide variety of soil amendment products out on the market today. Anything from what I've already mentioned to single-ingredient products like meals (kelp, bone or blood), compost, finely shredded bark, peat moss or anything else that helps change the soil to promote the health and growth of a plant. But there are a few other products that can help customers find out more about their soil, too.

To even figure out if they need a soil amendment, tests need to be conducted first. There are a lot of different soil test kits out there, but merchandising these with some explanations about why the make-up of your soil is important can get customers thinking about what may be causing some of their plant problems. Sometimes more extensive testing is necessary, for which local extension offices may be able to help find labs that can provide the services needed. Extension offices often have more resources, too, related to soils and amendments for both retailers and consumers to use.

If you offer a selection of tools, highlight which tools customers might need for applications of the different soil amendments. Again, that checklist can come in handy for first-timers or customers who haven't thought much about their soil health before.

Providing a wealth of resources goes a long way to helping customers create gardening plots and mixed containers

that will delight them all season long.

More Resources

I found a great resource for amending soil on the Colorado State University Extension website, which includes charts for the different types of soil needs, application rates and more. It also has a fact sheet that can be printed.

Visit the website at: extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/choosing-a-soil-amendment. **GP**