

Cover Story

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A Return to Nature for the Holidays

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Sometimes holiday trends skew toward the fantastical with heaps of glitter, outrageous color and other out-of-this-world accents that don't always lend themselves to garden retail. Fortunately, 2023 is looking like it won't be one of those years, with natural elements coming into focus and trends bending more toward what we look like on the regular.

Pictured: An example of the 2023 trends invoking natural and soft neutral colors, textures like wood, bark, paper and raw metals, and a vintage feel.

"A trend that we're seeing is 'Natural and Organic,'" says Beth Lorentz, marketing and product director at Glenhaven Home & Holidays, a direct-buying company that helps retailers go straight to the source to buy holiday, home and garden products. "It is strongly inspired by nature and it is defined by modest and raw atmospheres. Natural colors in the range of browns and greens, together with soft neutrals, are matched with wood, bark, paper and raw metals.

"Sheepskins and white furry textiles complete the cozy feel of this look. Another element is a focus on flocking. This snow-covered appearance has a vintage feel. Flocking not only appears on trees and pinecones, but on holiday ornaments and figures."

All of that is great news for our industry, as we continue to try to find ways to engage customers in off-peak seasonal markets like the holidays. This year there

were lots of great activities happening across the country in garden centers and houseplant shops that focused on the live goods, like wreath and porch pot classes, interior décor workshops featuring succulents and tillandsia,

holiday events like Girls' Night Out and Meet Santa activities, and so much more. Now, the key is doing a postmortem to look back at these events and see which ones brought the customers and resulted in them spending in the store or online.

I also want to mention that sometimes the holidays get super busy and/or illnesses tend to spike right around the holidays (especially last year), but some may still want to do their own porch pot or wreath. An idea may be to have a buy online, pick up in-store make-and-take that includes the "kit" and instructions, or a QR code to a video that shows how to do it. That way you also capture the people who can't spare time to get to the class (or don't want to risk a crowded class) and get them in the store to possibly pick up a few more necessities.

More About Live Holiday Greens

From the retailer perspective, live greens were a bit of a challenge to secure, but were still popular among customers, according to Deanna Gescheider, director of marketing at Moana Nursery in Reno, Nevada.

"Buying live Christmas greens and wreaths was problematic this year for us, but not for any reason that we expect will be the same for 2023. We've seen cost increases, but have been successful in maintaining gross margin and moving through the product just as quickly," she says. "There is always the concern that shortages of evergreens on the West Coast will drive up costs or result in less availability for next season, but we worry less about this in terms of cut greens than we would for, say, cut Christmas trees or containerized living material such as spruces, firs and some varieties of pine.



"Overall, we will be planning for a significant increase in cut greens sales for next season, due to what we perceive as an underserved market here in Reno."

Pictured: Woodland creatures, especially owls, will be in hot demand for 2023.

Where Moana is feeling the pressure is in holiday plants offered by the box stores at lower prices, including poinsettias, Norfolk pine and amaryllis. Deanna adds they will continue to offer these products, but know their gross profit won't be as high as it's been in the past.

"They will be stocked and merchandised specifically to help sell other higher-margin holiday items and to maintain a good customer count, providing as little reason as possible for our customers to shop at the box stores," she says. "Christmas cactus, on the other hand, seems to not be as prevalent with our competitors, so we will continue to bring these and other unique items in to improve the diversity of our

offering.

"We plan to sell more units of everything living next 2023, mostly due to transaction volume driven by competitive pricing, motivating promotions and tactful marketing."

Some of those activities include promotions like "buy two ornaments, get one free," and a focus not just on holiday, but the overall season (something Beth also agrees with). Deanna says the 2023 Christmas buy will feature six to eight traditional holiday themes and at least two new seasonal trends.

Beth says retailers can extend seasonal sales and have better shelf-life for products (which can be purchased and used well into January and February) with winter seasonal motifs like trees, snowflakes, stars, botanicals and greenery.

"The colors are more influenced by home décor color trends and the items can remain in the home throughout the winter season," she explained.



More Trends for 2023

Beth had a few more trends to highlight, including “Traditional Christmas,” which is all about “recalling the traditional Christmas atmospheres of our childhood days,” she says. “The timeless match of evergreen and Christmas red is the hero of this décor, together with all kinds of fantasy characters of our heritage. Think gnomes, elves, Santas, snowmen, reindeer—but also garlands, berries, Christmas stars.

Pictured: These tillandsia ornament bulbs and holiday holders were a new find for Moana Nursery this year, and they will likely stock them again next year.

“Neutral colors offer a new take on ‘Nordic’ décor. Black-and-white colors are paired with natural wood and a touch of gold to make a contemporary and refined look. The look is minimal and sleek.”

Her final trend is “Bright, Bold & Fun,” which harkens back to those bold, glittery colors I talked about in the beginning. That’s the pinks, purple, oranges and fun elements like ballerinas, cocktails and animals (and, of course, lots of glitter).

Meanwhile, Deanna at Moana Nursery agrees with the neutrals and winter décor, and she’s seeing color trends that highlight lavenders and pink hues paired with champagne, silver and gold.

“What is old is new again ... retro sells,” she says. “Blow molds, doe-eyed deer, bottle brush trees, etc. Nature woodland creatures (owls and mushrooms) are a favorite this year, as well as gnomes, polar bears and penguins. Santa, snow people, candy and gingerbread themes are still a crowd favorite.

“Velvets, feathers, natural fibers, flocked décor and anything that lights up were sellers, too.”



Pictured: During local garden center visits in late November, I found a beautiful and versatile mix of holiday greens and houseplants that could be given as a gift or kept as décor at Boyert’s Greenhouse & Farm in Medina, Ohio.

Beth also had owls on her list as the favorite for woodland creature décor (who doesn’t love owls?) and anything that lights up.

“LED-lighted products continue to be extremely popular,” she says, noting the broad range of lighted ornaments, hurricanes, candleholders, tree toppers, outdoor décor, light string sets and pre-lit greenery that Glenhaven Home & Holidays offers.

On the Downward Trend

Throughout the year last year we saw houseplant sales trend flat or down, a market correction after years of up, up, up (see our analysis in the May 2022 issue of Green Profit). That continued during the holidays, Deanna says, with fewer customers seeming to give live plants as gifts.

“Feedback from the operations teams conveys the sentiment that there seems to be somewhat fewer people purchasing living goods for holiday gifts this year. Poinsettias are moving decently (albeit at a reduced margin), however, it seems as though indoor plants as gifts are anecdotally exhibiting the downward trend we’ve been seeing in the category all year,” she says. “Sales of amaryllis and narcissus, both growing and in gift boxes, are showing improved sales this year and are often given as gifts.

“Our holiday-themed Christmas trees are selling at about flat compared to 2021 with the feedback that customers

would like some larger sizes, which, unfortunately, have not been available this year.”

I did ask Beth for recommendations in turning live goods into gifts, and if you’d like to make a go of it, here are her thoughts: “Offering a great assortment of holiday and seasonal ceramic, cement and metal containers for live trees, poinsettias and household plants is a great way to promote holiday gift-giving.”

She adds they offer a wide selection of porch pot and other live greenery accents and embellishments like pinecones, waterproof berries, branches, shatterproof ornaments, and picks and ribbons to make live goods giftable.

Deanna added they did find a unique addition this year that will likely make the cut in 2023: “We found some tillandsia sold in holiday-themed glass containers have been an interesting addition this season.”



During Cultivate’22, Ellen Wells and I visited the Monrovia booth to talk about lots of products. During that time we saw the new red holiday pots that are designed to call attention to in-store displays and highlight the giftable of a wide variety of plants. Fortunately, Monrovia is continuing the program for 2023, thanks to its popularity.

“We wanted to do something special for the holidays,” says Katie Tamony, chief marketing officer at Monrovia. “Our holiday program includes many unique décor and unexpected gift plants that go beyond the traditional varieties.”

Pictured: Monrovia's stylish crimson pot wrap for the holidays.

And, the best part is retailers can choose which plants they want to arrive in the wraps. Some examples for next year: culinary plants like Mountain Pepper, Haas Improved Manzanillo Fruiting Olive and Little Ragu Sweet Bay; shrubs Nuccio’s Gem Camellia and Little Darling Lilac; and from the newer houseplants lineup Ninetta Begonia, Ginny Peperomia and BlackJade Hahnii Snake Plant. **GP**