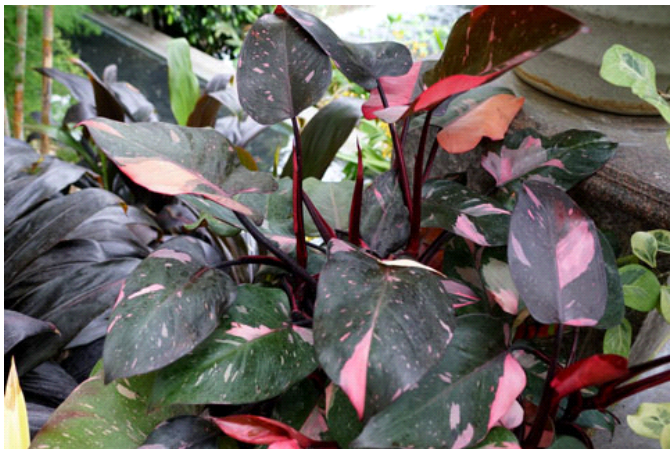


Features

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What's the Value of a Rare Plant?

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Being an expert combines training and practice. People who are experts know more than novices and use that knowledge to make decisions in a different manner from novices. How plant experts make decisions about their plant purchases (and how their decisions are different from novices) is not well understood.

Pictured: A Pink Princess Philodendron, an example of a somewhat rare plant that's sought after by houseplant enthusiasts.

Rare or unusual plants have increased in demand over the past several years. Many rare plants are slow growing or hard to propagate and are generally less available in retail outlets, which often results in higher prices. We wanted to better understand how experts and novices make plant purchase decisions, especially regarding rare or unusual plants.

The Method

Researchers developed an online survey and recruited people older than 18 years of age to participate in the study. Participants saw a series of nine plant descriptions and were asked how likely they would be to buy that plant as described (without photographs). We used four plant types/species (flowering plants, foliage plants, herbs or succulents), three price points (\$9.99, \$19.99 or \$29.99) and three availability levels (generally considered to be commonly available, moderately commonly available or rarely available). Lastly, 10 questions were asked to assess their plant knowledge with questions that had only one correct answer and one or three incorrect answers (depending on the question).

We had 1,010 useful and complete responses. Their answers to the plant knowledge questions were used to determine whether they were experts (with 8 to 10 correct responses) or novices (0 to 3 correct). The average number of correct responses to the 10-item plant knowledge scale was 4.2 of 10. There were 18.1% (n=183) of the study participants with 0 to 3 correct responses who were classified as novices, 45.7% with 4 to 7 correct responses who were classified as intermediates and 36.2% (n=365) with 8 to 10 correct responses who were classified as experts. We used only the novices and experts to see how their perceptions about buying rare plants differed.

Breaking Down Respondents

Demographically, novices and experts were different. Experts had a slightly higher percentage of females (52%) compared to novices (51%). Experts (64 years old on average) were eight years older than novices (55 years old on average) and had one more year of formal education. It makes intuitive sense that older and more educated persons might have more plant knowledge and be classified as an expert compared to younger or less-educated persons.

The percentage of urban residents was greater for novices (42%) compared to experts (21%). We suspect this is one of the first times that plant novices have been identified more predominantly as urban dwellers. Experts spent nearly twice as much on plants (\$157) in 2021 as novices (\$85). Interestingly, experts bought more plants, but from fewer plant categories than novices, which makes experts better targets for a marketer's communication dollars. Also, household income was similar for experts and novices.

More experts purchased plants compared to novices in each plant category listed in the study, except for flowering plants and evergreen shrubs. For annuals, vegetables, perennials, foliage plants and succulents, nearly twice the percentage of experts made purchases in those categories compared to novices. However, for flowering shrubs and shade trees, the percent of experts who made a purchase was only slightly higher than novices. More novices bought woody landscape plants (i.e., evergreen trees, evergreen shrubs, fruit trees) than experts, which may reflect new homeownership or updating their existing landscapes. These purchases of woody landscape plants may be more reflective of backbone or staple components of a landscape that may be purchased less frequently. Experts made more purchases in categories where plants are expected to die after one season requiring replacements (e.g., vegetables and annuals) or seasonal plantings.

More Insight

We used a conjoint methodology to indirectly determine what was important to novices and experts. We found that the type of plant was the most important attribute among the three attributes (i.e., plant type, price, availability) and was only slightly (1%) more important to experts when compared to novices. The high relative importance of plant type in this study is consistent with other studies. Plant price was the second most important attribute, which was also consistent with previous studies. This tells us that what kind of plant is being marketed is still more important to most people compared to the price.

How widely available (or how rare) a plant was ranked third in relative importance. Novices valued greater availability slightly more (2%) compared to experts; in other words, the availability of a plant was slightly more important to novices compared to experts.

Experts valued flowering and foliage plants more than novices. However, novices valued herbs more compared to experts. Succulents were the least valued for both groups, but novices valued succulents less compared to experts. This is counterintuitive given the media attention that has focused on the popularity of succulents among Millennial and younger cohorts. Perhaps novices are exploring new plants in general (e.g., herbs) because the mean number of new plant categories purchased was greater for novices compared to experts.

Price Sensitivity is Fluid

Experts valued the lowest price more than novices, which may indicate that experts are more price sensitive or have existing plant reference prices compared to novices. Novices reported, on average, higher utility for the moderate price point compared to experts, potentially indicating their lack of price sensitivity and greater receptiveness to moderate price points. For instance, if novices don't have an existing reference price for plants, their estimates may be slightly higher than experts who may have more experience shopping for plants.

Lastly, availability of the plant impacted choices more for novices compared to experts. Novices' value for moderately common plants was similar to experts, while experts valued rare plants more than novices. Availability,

especially for rare plants, should be targeted toward more experienced plant buyers. Yet, this runs slightly contrary to the experts valuing lower priced plants compared to moderately priced plants. Rare plants often come with higher price points and perhaps the expert gardener could be looking for a value or bargain for that rare plant. This result aligns with the fact that experts purchased a greater variety of plant types, and therefore, there may have been a wider variety of price points. Moderately common plants should be used to entice and encourage novice plant purchasers to explore less-common plants.

We found no difference in how much experts and novices valued commonly available plants. This may imply that common plants are positively perceived, but not as enticing as less-common plants to consumers with different knowledge levels. Although, there isn't a difference in perception for commonly available plants, this is still a positive message for firms that commonly available plants are still desired at all levels of expertise.

These findings may indicate that it's not plant experts who are driving the demand for rare or unusual plants; in fact, it may be the less-experienced, less-knowledgeable consumer who's driving up demand for the rare or unusual plants. This may also be consistent with social media exposure fueling awareness among younger consumers, which was supported by novices being nine years younger than experts in this study. Implications for future marketing efforts include targeting less-knowledgeable consumers with plant care and quality of life information to increase their plant expertise.

What's most important is the message that's being communicated through a firm's marketing tools. Across all demographic segments, quality of life is a higher order need that's important to them. Firms selling unique or rare plants should focus on the unique ways in which quality of life is improved for their customer base through enjoyment of these plants. **GP**

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More to Come:

This story is one of three this winter from these excellent researchers. Here's what you can expect coming up:

February: Research showing connections between mental health, plant purchases and optimism about the future.

March: Research highlights differences in purchasing certain types of plants (annuals, perennials, woody ornamentals and indoor foliage) and how that can impact marketing messages to consumers.