

Features

6/1/2023

Designing the Outdoors

Jennifer Polanz



The garden décor segment is in a tricky spot at the moment. Consumers are set to travel more this summer than they have in the past couple of years, which always puts spending on outdoor accents lower on the to-do list. However, Americans love their outdoor spaces, and based on a recent study (more below), 80% of those asked said their outdoor living space is more valuable to them than ever before.

That means garden retailers have the difficult task of curating a selection that they know customers will want to make sure it all flies off the shelves by the end of the

season. Of course, hard goods like accents and décor can overwinter, but it gets more expensive every day you hang on to it.

Fortunately, the folks at IMC, the company that owns AmericasMart in Atlanta, as well as the markets at High Point, North Carolina and Las Vegas, provided us with details from the aforementioned survey about outdoor furnishings to show what consumers are planning for this year.

The study was conducted by Wakefield Research on behalf of The International Casual Furnishings Association (ICFA), and showed 54% of Americans plan to purchase new furnishings and décor for their outdoor spaces. It also noted that consumers will spend an average of nine hours a week outdoors, up from seven last year.

The most popular categories for upgrading? They are:

- Outdoor lighting (36%)
- Shade items like umbrellas, pergolas and awnings (27%)
- Smaller décor items like pillows, cushions and rugs (26%)
- Firepits/fireplaces (26%)
- Updated flooring (22%)
- Seating/sofas (21%)

- Water features (19%)
- Outdoor kitchens and bars (17%)

Creating the Atmosphere

While researching this story I received details from Sullivan Gift about its line of outdoor solar lighting as part of its larger focus on outdoor and garden décor through its newer Woodstock Elements brand. They cited market research that predicted an annual growth of more than 6% in outdoor solar lighting sales. Marketing Manager Megan Gygi attributes much of this to the focus on creating the right atmosphere for outdoor spaces.



Pictured: • The 9-in. copper hanging solar light in the Woodstock Elements line from Sullivan Gift.

• These Dang birds from Big Grass Living are a hit with wholesale and retail customers.



She pointed me to the company's 2022 Outdoor Décor Consumer Behavior Survey, where 89% of respondents said the atmosphere of their outdoor space was most important to them. This study found consumers purchasing more of the following from 2020 to 2022: planters and pots (56%), wind chimes (50%), outdoor furniture (47%), and lanterns and lights (37%).

"Our survey shows that consumers make purchasing decision for their outdoor spaces based on the atmosphere those purchases will create. Because beautiful lighting adds ambiance—both in the daytime and at night—it contributes style, warmth and personality to the overall atmosphere," Megan said. "Retailers can build consumer interest by setting up mock outdoor scenes—complete with lighting—in their retail stores to inspire consumers."

Delighting Customers with Something New

Retail shoppers are used to seeing lots of the same offerings year after year. One way to really catch their attention is to offer something so unique with such an interesting backstory that they have to have it. John Hanesworth is co-owner of Big Grass Living wholesale with his wife, Duang, and I spoke to him about the wholesale operation as well as their retail store, which offers home and outdoor décor.

"We often test the market, and we get a lot of feedback from customers about what they're looking for so it helps us direct our wholesale line," he said. "They're definitely interested in outdoor lighting."

Big Grass Living specializes in bringing hand-crafted products made by family run manufacturers in Duang's native Thailand. That's to say, it's not mass produced and it is made from all natural materials. He sees lots of interest in hand-made décor products that are each slightly different. A good example of this are the "Dang birds" they brought in from an artist in Thailand whose nickname is Dang. He hand-forms the birds out of clay and initially they were sold as a larger piece of 10 to 12 birds perching on a piece of teak or driftwood. However, customers asked to buy individual birds, so Dang began to make single versions.

"They all have different expressions, a turn of a head," John said. "They're a hit. That's one of those things garden centers have to get in stock, and once they see customers' reactions to them, they buy them again."

"It's nice to see buyers taking the challenge to buy creative items."



Pictured: This clay mosquito coil burner from Big Grass Living is hand-turned on a potter's wheel with hand cut openings. Smoky wood in the kiln gives it a dark charcoal finish.

He mentioned an interesting point, too, which is that while exhibiting at recent trade shows like TPIE, he saw a younger contingent buying for retail, particularly among the houseplant shop crowd. He was even impressed by an owner's daughter who was just 15 and managing the conversation about what they wanted to buy. If we're seeing a younger audience coming into garden centers, perhaps we should enlist the help of younger buyers to cater to these customers?

Shipping Continues to Improve

While I had John on the line, I asked him about the shipping situation, which has normalized quite a bit over the past couple of months from record highs in container prices and delays during COVID. He said shipments that took about six months pre-COVID stretched as long as two years. Those extremes are moving back toward six months finally. That's not to say everything is perfect, though.

"Domestic freight is really bad because diesel was so high," he said, adding those prices are coming down now. Everyone approached the added costs differently, too. Some built the extra into the wholesale price, while his company (like others) added a percentage ocean freight charge as a separate line item when shipping costs were at their worst (one of his containers topped out at \$28,000). That line item is gone now, dropped about a year ago once prices normalized. The goal now is to continue to build up product to make sure it stays available. "Our wholesale line is not big, but every single thing we do is curated to items we know will sell well," he added. "It's really gratifying to me—I'll get emails from buyers that say we got our shipment today and the staff really loves it. They get excited when there's new things in the store." **GP**