

Features

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Take it From Me: A Buyer's Advice

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Let's set the scene: It's the mid 1990s. I'm working for a high-end independent garden center called English Gardens in metro Detroit. My day is suddenly disrupted—the tree and shrub buyer has shown up for a rare visit to the store.

I both love and hate it (the visit, not him). I'm the shrub and tree assistant manager, and I'm not sure what he's looking for, what he's looking at or what critiques are coming my way when he talks with my boss or the general manager. So I immediately head over to talk with him. He's a guy in

his 70s, still spry. I'd describe him as pleasantly cantankerous. Over the next several years, he'd tell me all about pruning and comment on nursery growers' quality. I'd also ask him for this or that (sometimes I'd even get the plants I asked about).

I liked the guy—Loren Blum was his name. And I wanted to be him when I grew up. Fast forward to 2015 ... and I'm being interviewed by Chalet Nursery to be the shrub and tree buyer. I'm excited AND best of all, I'm not even 50. I can become my own version of the cantankerous plant buyer even sooner than I thought was possible.

The Importance of a Dedicated Buyer

Over the years before Chalet, I've been a supplemental plant buyer and even the primary plant buyer with other store responsibilities. Often the department manager or assistant manager at the same time. That was a lot. I mean the act of talking with a rep or sending out emails maybe wasn't too much, but the idea of getting out of the store to see a trial garden or tour a nursery? That might be darn near impossible. I had to manage employees, water or do any of the never-ending tasks that need to be completed.

Over time, I came to see the value of a dedicated buyer. Someone who can find the best plants, in person. Someone who can educate the sales team or landscape designers on what's happening in the industry regarding hard-to-find plants, what's new, new restrictions, etc. Someone to build relationships with the growers, arrange for delivery dates, maximize discounts and orders to optimize freight. As a buyer, attending trade shows is very important, not just to glad-hand around, but also to be the face of the company and build the relationships and to make plans for the seasons to come.

How Buyers Impact Other Departments

My role as a buyer puts me in constant contact—not only with sales reps and growers, but also teams within the company. My internal customers are the sales and marketing teams, and I interface with them daily. What are the

sales needs? What are we missing? What's trending in cash-and-carry? Marketing wants to predict: What can we promote? What can we do to drive more customer interest on social media? How do we get more customers to come in this weekend? The buyer is part of those teams.

The buyer also brings to life what's looking great from the growers. Knowing that is key. Telling the sales team or marketing team when the salvia is going to be exploding with color makes you (the buyer) a hero. Not knowing may mean we miss our sales goal for the weekend.

Being out with the growers also helps to predict what's trending. What's the grower growing and how many? Talking with their sales team and knowing what isn't popular this season helps you to pivot and helps to reduce inventory. Maybe that great-looking plant needs to get a social media push to help move the plants.

Who's on Your Team?

Building your team, between the company you work for and the growers you buy from, is entirely your responsibility. I think this combined team can set you apart from other IGCs in your area. Let the sales representative know what you're expecting, ask for pictures or see the plants in person. If the plants don't meet your standards, you have to let them know. If you don't, they don't have an opportunity to try to make it better.

Also share with them when they exceed your expectations. Positive feedback and appreciation are part of building your team. Help them to get to know you, your store's needs and how to see things from your perspective. Make your wishes known. "I really feel that we could rock (insert plant and size here). Would you grow that?" Let them know the best way to communicate with you and when you'd like to hear back. Is that texting? Email? That way, the interface works for both sides. This team, these relationships, set you up for success. The better it works, the better the season will be.

I'm lucky to be where I am. I'm a buyer, first and foremost. My job is to shop for the best plant at the best price. When customers buy up all the plants of a certain variety in one weekend, when we get a Yelp review about how beautiful the store looks or when a landscape client tells the architect how happy they are with their newly installed yard, I'm part of that. I'm part of that team. My goal is to deliver. To know what's new out in the market, when they're going to hit their prime and how to get those plants to the job site or the store sales floor.

If you're thinking of bringing on a plant buyer, that's what they can do for you and your IGC. They're a relationship builder, an educator for your team and someone who can help your store stand apart.

Best wishes to you, fellow buyers. I hope that all of your professional relationships blossom this season.

Now, Some Advice for Growers

When I visit a grower, I get asked, "What do you want to see?" Which is a fair question. My response is always: "I want to see the thing I don't know you grow. I want to see the plants you're most proud of or you think you grow best."

Any employee who works for a place often becomes accustomed to the daily views and their own plants. Step out from that. It might be my first time there, or not, but I'm not there every month, week or daily so your growing operation is a place full of wonder. Be proud and show it off.

I recommend asking the buyer how long they've got for the visit and show as much as you can show in the time that can be spent. This will increase your sales together. The more the buyer gets to know the grower, the stronger that relationship will be, which in turn will lead to more sales on both of your ends. **GP**

Kevin Collins was born and raised in Metro Detroit, Michigan, and has been in the horticulture industry for more than

30 years. He's been with Chalet since 2016 and is currently their Perennial Buyer responsible for expanding their plant palette with trees, shrubs, tropicals and other perennials. You can reach him at kevinc@chaletnursery.com.