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## A Peek “Behind the Greens”

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I don't know about you, but I love to watch videos that provide a look “behind the scenes.” I remember when I was a young child my favorite episode of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” was the one where Mr. Rogers showed a video on the screen he called “Picture-Picture” about how crayons were made. I'm sure if I were to look up a behind-the-scenes video of how crayons are made today it would look very different, with more computerized systems than what was available in the 1970s.

My corner of the horticulture industry is a lot like the video about how crayons are made—it definitely looks a whole lot different than it did in the 1970s, but some things remain the same. To go behind the scenes for greens, most people, even in this industry, don't realize that a lot of the Christmas/winter greenery is not farm-grown, but rather grown in the wild on mountains. Sections are leased to “cutters” and these trained arborists thin the trees, which actually aids in their growth if done correctly.

Unfortunately, there are sometimes untrained individuals who attempt to circumvent the system by cutting illegally, and in the process, their methods are not sustainable, which can affect the future availability of material. A quick Google search on the topic of “illegal harvesting of Christmas greens (or spruce tops or birch poles or even Christmas trees)” will result in countless articles popping up that highlight this problem. Indeed, it can be like the Wild West in some areas when it comes to this situation.

### Another Alternative

Over the past several years, we've been monitoring challenges with a particular product, called Spruce Tops. This product has been particularly affected by a “Wild West”-type scenario that's had a major impact on both the availability of this material and the quality of what's available. We have concerns that if the trend continues, there may be a tipping point where demand far exceeds what's available, mainly due to regrowth affected by incorrect harvesting methods.

While I can't control the outcome of a situation such as this, what I can do is identify how my customers are using this product and focus on finding an alternative that will accomplish the same objective. For 2023, we've done this by creating a new product called “Evergreen Toppers,” which serves as an alternative option for 3- to 4-ft. Spruce Tops, which is a popular size. In fact, the design and creation of several of our products over the years are solutions to challenges shared with us by our customers.

This year, we're celebrating the 10-year anniversary of our original Wintergreens Porch Pot Décor Kit that addressed a need for a bundle of porch pot items and it remains a fan favorite to this day.

## Evolving Products to Meet Consumers' Needs

Products evolve and change, not only because of product availability, but also because of the changing demographics of the generations. Several decades ago, life was slower. Spending an entire weekend stringing hundreds of feet of garland down a fence was a holiday tradition that usually happened after Thanksgiving. Today's high-speed families dart from one travel sports team event to another, usually fueling with Starbucks or Dunkin' to provide caffeine to power through, and grabbing groceries via drive-up on their way home. They feel pressured to decorate right after Halloween because the Hallmark Channel has been playing Christmas movies for weeks. I don't say this to stereotype; I'm actually one of those people and my lifestyle looks quite different from that of my grandparents.

When my grandparents were my age, ads featuring garland prominently displayed the price along with the feet or yards of the garland or roping. It was relevant then because of consumer behavior in that era, but it's no longer relevant today. If you want to be relevant with today's consumer behavior, consider creating "bundles of products" and not selling everything à la carte.

For example, a "Porch Bundle" might include a wreath, wreath hanger and bow for the door, with a "door garland" (which is 15 ft., but see how I left the length out of the description) along with one or two porch pots and maybe even some winter hanging baskets. With an order for this bundle, the consumer doesn't have to think and has an Instagram-ready front porch. You could even take this one step further and offer delivery and set-up of their porch bundle (if you have this ability), or let them preorder the "Porch Bundle" online and pick up curbside for grab-n-go service. This will cater to those too busy to shop your store.

The flip side are those consumers looking to connect the purchase of their holiday decorations with an activity. Consider hosting a family-friendly winter porch pot workshop and get the children (your future customers) actively coming into your store with their parents. This audience isn't just shopping your store; they're soaking up your atmosphere with their senses while creating memories with their families. These people aren't buying a product; they're investing in an experience.

This audience wants to know that these products are harvested sustainably. They want to be told that after they've enjoyed their winter pots, not to just toss them, but rather place them in their yards for the wildlife to use and enjoy. Send the children home with pinecones and instructions on how to make natural bird feeders to hang on the porch pots when they're past their prime.

It's all about giving consumers a peek "behind the greens," sharing with them and educating them. If you do that, they'll eagerly follow you and your "expert" advice, allowing you to seamlessly transition them from one product with declining availability right into another one that doesn't have that challenge. When you walk with your customers instead of just sell to them, you'll gain their trust and they'll invest in you. **GP**

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