

Features

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The Paradox of Choice

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Bagged soils and amendments are products that a majority of gardeners will pick up frequently, especially if they understand the importance of them and trust the products you're offering. Don't take my word for it, though.

In November 2023, the Mulch & Soil Council commissioned a nationwide survey of about 1,400 consumers on their soil-purchasing habits. Of those respondents, at least 50% in each U.S. region said they bought soil in either 2022 or 2023. Further, 47% were stable soil buyers, saying they purchased at least one

bagged soil each year.

Pictured: It's easy to spot the red and white bag of Bumper Crop Soil Builder out in front of Flamingo Road Nursery in Davie, Florida.

They asked about bagged versus bulk and the majority preferred bagged, with the median purchase at 6.9 bags a year. According to the Council's report, garden/landscape soil was the most purchased, followed by potting soil and top soil.

We also know that consumers can suffer from too much choice at the retail store, especially if it's something they're not especially interested in researching or learning about. Meaning, it's the store's responsibility to show them the best options. Here, we'll take a look at a couple of ways to do that.

Trust In Your Brand

There are several reasons why private labeling bagged soils is a benefit to independents. One, you've already built trust with the customer who's coming into the store to buy your plants. It's a natural progression to continue that trust by providing a soil mix you've created or a formulation you trust (and, hopefully, use yourself if you grow your own) and position it as the best option for optimal plant health.

The second reason is financial. With a private label, no one can price check directly against your product, unlike a name brand that could also be in a box store.

"You can't compete with that price," noted Tim Quebedeaux, owner of RetailKPI Consulting. We talked about the

option of private labeling during our interview for the “Experts On ...” cover story for August. “If you get that customer, that’s a transactional customer.”



Pictured: Signage highlighting White Oak Garden Center's Planting Package, this one for trees (they also offer one for shrubs).

If you offer your own brand, however, then that’s the bulk of what you offer and most will buy it. Perhaps not all, but most, he said.

Many of the big media companies will help you private label your own mix, so if there’s one you’re partial to, ask. If you don’t think private label is right, then talk to your media companies about offering different sizes, more premium bags (handles are lovely on bagged goods) or other ways to differentiate from larger competitors.

Another option is what small plant shop retailer The Victorian in Atlanta offers—their own blended mixes that they hand-craft in-house. That may be a better option for houseplants, succulents, tropicals and other popular plants that require specific blends. At the shop I visited in East Atlanta (they have another that just opened on the trendy Beltline), they offer bags of the

mixes and denote on the plant tags which blend suits it best. It’s a great way to be the expert and show customers exactly what they need so they aren’t paralyzed in front of a wall of bags.

Live What You Sell

While interviewing industry consultant Sid Raisch, owner of Horticultural Advantage, for the August cover story, we got on the topic of choice and how to steer customers. He recalled a garden center tour before organics had really taken off across the country and he asked John Dromgoole of The Natural Gardener in Austin, Texas, how retailers can increase sales of organic products.

“And his answer was, ‘Here’s how we do it: we only sell organic,’” Sid said. “How obvious could the answer be? So choose the fertilizer that’s best. Choose the whatever that’s best. You can sell the others, but if you want to sell a lot of something, focus on that one and make it your choice.

“Make it a famous hero within your own realm and spread that fever to customers.”

That sentiment applies to soils, too. Another great way to live what you sell is to put a little bit of your own skin in the game. There are at least a couple of garden centers now offering planting packages for trees and shrubs that include specific soil, fertilizer and/or other amendments or mulch for the ultimate planting success. If a customer purchases this package with the plant, the garden center extends the warranty.

Here’s a specific example: White Oak Garden Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, offers the White Oak Planting Package in two options, one for trees and one for shrubs. For trees, customers purchase one bag each of White Oak Organic Planting Mix, Espoma Bio-Tone Starter Plant Food (4-lb. bag), mulch and one tree guard. For shrubs, customers purchase one bag each of White Oak Organic Planting Mix and Espoma Bio-Tone Starter Plant Food (4-lb. bag) and two bags of mulch. With each of the planting package purchases, customers receive a two-year guarantee of plant material at 100% of the purchase price.

The benefits of an offering like this are many: the plants have a better start in the ground, which means a greater rate of success for the customer, and the garden center has a way to ensure customers have the right mix of products (rather than leaving them to figure it out on their own). We talked a lot about the importance of increasing average ticket, too, and this is another way to do that.

If you aren't quite there yet on offering a package, I did ask a pair of consultants one product that should be in every cart in the spring and their answer was immediate: Bumper Crop Soil Builder. Carried by Master Nursery Garden Center, a co-op exclusive to independent garden centers, it was the one product both Dave Williams and Erik Dietl-Friedli of Garden Center Consultants LLC said they sold while at their respective retail stores and had great success with. Erik said he put Bumper Crop in every plant department, and made sure customers knew to pick up the "red and white bag" if they couldn't remember the name.

"Bumper Crop was a part of that key package for us," Dave added about his store. "The plant will respond better if you add some sort of soil amendment to it and it seemed that the formulation for Bumper Crop is key."

The Facts About Peat

We've talked about buying and marketing bagged soils, but we haven't talked about what's in them. We've seen a lot of conflicting information around sphagnum peat moss lately, so we wanted to highlight some key facts about the ingredient, which is often included in bagged soil mixes. In 2022, we hosted a webinar on the facts behind the sustainability of peat, and *GrowerTalks* Editor Jen Zurko wrote an article based on it. Read the full article [HERE](#). Here are the highlights:



Pictured: Hand-crafted soil mixes at The Victorian in the East Atlanta Village.

Sphagnum peat comes from northern temperate zones, which is why Canada is the perfect place for peat to grow. There are 114 million hectares of Canadian peat resources, with only about 32,000 hectares (60,000 acres) being used for harvesting during the past 90 years, so less than 1% (0.03%) is currently used.

In Canada, 81% of the peatlands are "virgin peatlands" that have remained untouched. After that, 15% is used for agriculture and then other uses (including harvesting

for horticulture, urban development and forestry) is less than 1%.

Veriflora offers a Responsible Peatland Management certification (more than 80% of the production for North America is from Veriflora-certified Canadian peat moss producers).

Researchers are looking at peat alternatives to supplement supply because of uncertainty in harvesting due to changing weather patterns. There's a 30- to 40-day window during the summer when peat can be harvested, dependent on the weather. If there's been too much rain, the equipment (which acts like a large vacuum) can't go out into the fields because it'll cause compaction, making it more difficult to harvest the bog. **GP**