

Features

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Rockin' Around the Garden Center

Katie Elzer-Peters

About three years ago, I started noticing something specific happening at plant shops and then at garden centers. A new category seemed to spring up overnight: rocks.

Not landscape rocks or flagstones, but crystals: sparkly, polished, rough, smooth, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, black, white. Chalky and transparent. Big and small. Carved and tumbled and polished or cleaved, dusted off and plopped on a shelf.

Pictured: Nanthawat "Nat" Jiranuwatana, owner of The Other Side Nursery outside Portland, Oregon, added crystals to his shop in late 2022. • Crack your own geodes at Groovy Plants Ranch in Marengo, Ohio. • Plants and crystals look great together at Seed to Stem in Worcester, Massachusetts. • The folks at Nicholson-Hardie have found designers and interior decorators have gravitated toward their selection of show-stopping rocks and crystals.



As a kid, I was a rock-picker. As an adult, I look up the local geology of a place before I travel there—all in hopes of finding a rock to bring home. (Incidentally, so does my husband.) The funniest thing happened when we traveled: he dropped me off with our luggage to check it in after a trip to Vermont.

"Ma'am, your bag is overweight," they said. "What?!?" I exclaimed.

It was my husband's suitcase. I kept pulling things out of the main compartment. "What on EARTH is in here?" I asked to myself, not wanting to give away the thought that someone else packed this suitcase. When he joined me at security I asked him.

"Oh, I found a bunch of rocks in Lake Champlain. They're in the front pocket." (Our 20th wedding anniversary is this month. Will he give me another rock? I'd love a big geode for the garden!)

Rock Steady

Since the rocks first popped up in plant shops, the category has been steadily growing. Do I have data? Definitely not. Other than the anecdotal evidence that almost every plant shop I visit has a crystal display, and increasingly, so do the garden centers.

At Nicholson-Hardie, a home, gift and garden center in Dallas, Texas, they started 20 years ago with 5-lb. bags of tumbled white or black stones and then expanded, with help from their gift category buyers, into offering more options.

Co-owner Josh Bracken said, “You would think that we’d have kids all over the rocks, but it is actually our designers, interior decorators and general customers that gravitate toward them.”

What’s behind their selection? “We look for real show stoppers,” Josh noted. “A challenge we have is that we do the volume of a garden center with 200 parking spots and we have 18 parking spots. That means everything we sell has to pull its weight.”

He said they mostly mark crystals and statement rocks according to their typical pricing philosophy, operating off of a keystone 2.25 to 2.5-times markup to cover freight. Their gift buyers do most of the sourcing, but they also scour estate sales for unusual pieces.

“We bought some antique rock bowls from an estate sale and we’ll sell some of them for between \$1,000 and \$3,000,” he added. “These are truly unique pieces you won’t find on Amazon. It’s nice to have one-of-a-kind products like that in our mix.”

Money, Money, Money

Items like agate slice coasters and statement quartz chunks round out a home and garden product mixture that has made the fall a busier time than spring at Nicholson-Hardie. “It helps even out the revenue,” said Josh.

Nanthawat “Nat” Jiranuwatana, owner of The Other Side Nursery, a small plant and crystal shop outside of Portland, Oregon, started his business selling plants and added crystals in late 2022.

“As kids, we all collected rocks and we all have fond memories of rocks,” he said. “Then one day, my partner bought a beautiful pink calcite crystal. Then, you know, one thing leads to another and we had a house full of rocks. We thought, ‘If we’re spending this much money on rocks, there must be a market for them.’”

“You know how collections go,” he said. I sure do.

I See It and I Like It and I Want It

Mary Beth Hughes, co-owner of Rosie’s Gardens in Indianapolis, Indiana, said about their rock and crystal products, “I’ve always kinda gotten into things I like. We have always sold stone and bulk stone and boulders for the garden; then we visited with a man in southern Indiana who had big geodes and rose quartz.”

For a long time, the big stones were their main sellers. “You can add a lot to your gardens with stones. They are a form of garden art.”

When I was visiting their shop last spring, my niece was all about the crystals. Mary Beth said, “A lot of people are into crystals, too, because of their healing properties. They hold the crystals and feel connected with the earth.”

Let’s get Physical, Metaphysical

We’re not going to go too deep into the metaphysical meanings of various crystals, but in addition to statement decor, metaphysical meanings are a big reason why many people acquire certain crystals and why they place them in specific areas of their homes. You can find books and websites with descriptions of what each crystal means.

If you're going to carry a bunch, it's worth having a few of those books around for your customers to thumb through and possibly even to make labels or signs with some of that info. Nat concurs. "People come in here looking for specific crystals," he said. "Offer them and you'll make money."

Flowers in the Window

Nat also really appreciates the way rocks and crystals are pieces of nature just like plants are. "When you have a bunch of knickknacks around the house, things can look junky. Cram a bunch of plants and crystals together and it all just looks good."

Marie Mims Butler, a garden speaker and retired zoo horticulturist has made gems and rocks part of her gardens, indoors and out, for a long time. She does go to the big gem shows.

"I like looking at the tables set up outside the official shows," she said. "That's where the really interesting stuff is."

Marie added she sees so many echoing designs of flowers and leaves in the natural striations and blooms of the crystals: "Nature repeats patterns."

I asked her what the trends at the rock shows are. "The vendors tell me that both metaphysical and interior design use of rocks and crystals is far outpacing more traditional uses like jewelry."

That bodes well for garden centers wanting to add rocks as a category.

You Will, You Will Rock It

- Go to local rock society meetings. Collectors often want to offload pieces to make room for more.
- Pick through estate sales for the same reason: rare and unique finds.
- Stock a variety of pieces and finishes. Some people like smooth, tumbled rocks and others like raw specimens.
- Identify the rocks and crystals. People purchasing for metaphysical properties want to know what they're buying.
- Look for rocks at gift buying shows. You'll find lots of choices.

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