

Features

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Create Your Edge

Matthew Olson



When it comes to plant shopping, consumers have no shortage of options. So how can you stand out? Display gardens can provide an experience they won't soon forget. From new varieties to quirky features, these displays offer inspiration for consumers and value for your business.

Groovy Plants Ranch, Marengo, Ohio.

The Wow Factor

Liz and Jared Hughes own Groovy Plants Ranch in Marengo, Ohio, about 45 minutes north of Columbus. In the last decade, their nursery has become a unique destination for gardeners, including for their unusual plant displays.

"We like to add fun items to the gardens that will appeal to everyone," he said. "Kids think the hobbit house is really cool, while guys of a certain age enjoy the 1966 El Camino or the old tractor."

Each display features a theme that contributes to the nursery's whimsical feel. There's even a hippie bus with a coleus display on the roof. The gardens also inspire customers to grow lesser-known plants, like hardy bananas.

"It's inspiring for people to see the bananas, especially in mid to late June when they've gained size. They're blown away when they find out these plants can be perennials in their yard," he added.

The nursery is situated in a clearing in the woods, so the whole setup feels like a garden. As customers arrive, a showy bed runs along the road in front of the store.

"The dramatic entrance is a good indicator that you've arrived at the plant place," Jared said. Across the nursery, he has the same mindset with the other displays. He calls it the "wow" factor.

"It's one thing to plant a whole bed of petunias, but it's another to add an element that makes people stop and take a picture," Jared said. "You want those features to be recognizable. When a customer posts a picture of an old pick-up truck with cactus and flowers pouring out of the bed, make sure the name of your business is visible in the photo."

A Regional Focus



Winter Greenhouse, near Hayward, Wisconsin, is a popular stop for residents of the upper Midwest. I spoke with Jim Wilson and Kelly Larsen to learn about the role of display gardens there. Jim owns the business and Kelly manages their display gardens. Since 1984, Jim has been adding to the gardens with

two goals in mind.

Examples of breeder trials heading out to independent garden centers from Peace Tree Farms.

“With our Zone 3 climate, we wanted to see the true hardiness of each plant and let customers see how they look when they’re fully grown,” Jim said. “We were tempted by many plants and people had different opinions on what would be hardy.”

What began as a collection of plants has evolved into a display that attracts consumers to the nursery. I had the chance to visit a few years ago and the first thing I noticed was the gardens, which are next to the parking lot. “Many customers walk through the display gardens before they go shopping,” Kelly said. “It sets a mood because of the beauty and quiet, and customers enjoy touring it.”

Many of the gardens have a theme, which helps consumers narrow down ideas for their space. Walking paths allow visitors to explore each area, while signage identifies each plant. In many ways, the gardens are integrated with other areas of the garden center.

“The retail check-out area is right in the middle of the woodland garden, so the gardens are a huge part of the shopping experience,” Kelly added.

Additionally, the nursery uses the gardens for marketing. Every year, the staff create an in-store catalog that highlights their selection. Images from the display gardens showcase plants and projects that are underway, keeping consumers updated on the latest happenings at the nursery.

“For years, our most popular display was a miniature garden for the kids,” Jim said. “We hosted themed events that were tied into that display, which is something garden centers can do to increase sales.” Additionally, they’ve hosted tours for bus groups and garden clubs.

And it’s not just the consumers who benefit. Kelly and the landscape team use the gardens as a source of design ideas for local landscaping projects. When the business first began, landscaping wasn’t part of it, but that soon changed.

“Much of our initial business came from people visiting the gardens and saying, ‘This is such a wonderful display. Can you do this at my place?’” Jim added. “It’s a wonderful way to mix the landscaping and retail business.”

As you might guess, maintenance is a key part of the gardens. Over the years, Jim and Kelly have found ways to make this task efficient.

“Adding a full irrigation system made this process much easier,” Jim said. “Before the system was installed, we had been using sprinklers, and it was lots of work to move them and avoid tripping over the hoses.”

Coming Up Next



Display gardens can also be used to showcase new varieties. Lloyd Traven is the owner of Peace Tree Farm, a wholesale nursery in eastern Pennsylvania. He's been working on a program that connects breeders with retailers to evaluate new introductions.

Display gardens at Winter Greenhouse near Hayward, Wisconsin

"About three years ago, we were approached by a breeding company and they were unhappy with the vendor that was growing trial boxes for them. They asked if we would grow the samples for them."

Lloyd wasn't familiar with these programs, so he began asking questions. For example, who receives these plants? In many cases, sales brokers would receive the trial plants to provide feedback to the company.

"I knew there must be a better way to get feedback on these plants; then I had a realization. We need to work with independent garden centers to put these plants where the public will see them," he said. By evaluating plants in a retail setting, IGCs can share their expertise on new plants entering the market and have a place to showcase them.

In Lloyd's program, each breeder works with the retailers to determine varieties and quantities, then Peace Tree grows and ships the plants to the garden center. Once received, retailers can use the plants as they see fit. Like any program, feedback is important. As part of a trial agreement, each participant gets a survey to fill out each month.

"We want to know how you're growing them. Are those plants in the ground or combined in a pot? How do they compare to similar varieties on the market?" Lloyd said. "We're working with a professor from the University of Tennessee to create a place where all the data can be collected at the end of the season." And it's not just retailers that are involved; consumers also get to view the potential introductions and fill out a survey.

Until now, the program has focused on annuals, perennials and veggies. However, shrubs will be added in the future.

After 40 years in the industry, Lloyd hopes the program will shift how plants are being marketed.

"This is the first nationwide program that allows independent garden centers and consumers to have a say in what plants come to market," he added. **GP**

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