

Cover Story

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A Soil for Every Cart

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Virtually every gardening project requires some kind of soil or amendment. Whether it's a raised bed garden (old or new), mixed containers or in-ground planting, the ultimate success will come from getting the soil right.

The All-Purpose Compressed Potting & Planting Soil from Organic Plant Magic expands with water and can be used indoors or outdoors and in containers or in the ground.

"Soil shouldn't be treated as an afterthought," said Chad Massura, founder of Rosy Soil. "If customers

understand it's the foundation of success, putting it in the cart becomes a no-brainer."

So how do you get them to understand that? Here we'll dive into a few different aspects of some of the soils available for retail and dig in to strategies to improve that conversion rate.

Gaining More Insight

Each product on the market has a different composition, and while some can be used for multiple projects, others serve a very specific purpose. Here we're taking a look at just some of those brands out there. For example, Organic Plant Magic's all-purpose Compressed Potting & Planting Soil works for both containers and in the ground with its blend of coconut coir, worm castings, complete micro and macro nutrients (plus trace minerals), and beneficial microorganisms, including mycorrhizae.

Sun Gro, meanwhile, offers both with a lineup of multiple brands that retailers can position in good/better/best options—many of which are OMRI-organic certified—as well as multi-purpose and project-specific mixes. They formulate mixes with a range of horticulture ingredients like responsibly sourced Canadian sphagnum peat moss and/or coir for water and nutrient retention, perlite for aeration, and bark and/or compost for additional structure and fertility. Some blends also have an ingredient they call RESILIENCE, a silicon that can support stronger stems and improve drought tolerance.



Bumper Crop is a brand that has served the independent garden center well since the 1950s, when E.B. Stone began making the formulations for Master Nursery Garden Center. Today E.B. Stone still makes the West Coast blends and Coast of Maine makes the East Coast offerings, which include the Organic Soil Builder, Organic Potting Soil and now the new Natural & Organic Raised Bed Mix. Both companies provide formulations that are all-natural and organic, and include well-aged compost, as well as their “ocean biology” of crab, lobster and kelp meals and worm castings, among other ingredients, depending on the product. The new Raised Bed Mix has a particle size in between the Soil Builder and the Potting Soil, providing a balance for moisture retention and drainage for raised beds and large containers.

The Aroid and Orchid mixes from Rosy Soil were just introduced this summer.

On the houseplant side, Rosy Soil has multiple formulations specific to plant needs, including a Seedling Soil, a Cactus & Succulent Blend, a general Houseplant Soil, and new introductions Aroid Soil and Orchid Mix. All of the mixes are peat-free, and the new Aroid Soil has pine bark fines, biochar, pumice, worm castings and mycorrhizae, while the Orchid Mix trades out for orchid bark, along with biochar, pumice, worm castings and mycorrhizae.

Dropping Knowledge on Customers

You’re the expert and you know when certain soil mixes will work best in different situations. However, the challenge is always either getting the customer to ask or having the time to interact with the customer to get them that knowledge. The garden center gets busy, especially in the middle of spring.

The first step is gaining the right knowledge in the first place. “The first step we recommend is the Master Nursery Professional Training and Exam Certification when all those new employees are hired to kick the season off,” said Pat Flaherty, Vice President of Sales with Master Nursery Garden Centers, a co-op exclusive to independents. “It’s not just on Master Nursery and Bumper Crop; it’s on the whole industry.”

They offer a large training manual with an exam, and those who pass are given a certificate and a name badge. They do it because training is an essential part of bringing new employees up to speed on what the products do for the customers.

Once trained up, the folks at Sun Gro Horticulture have some great questions retail employees can lead off with to get the right product in the hands of the customers.

“Retailers can play a consultative role by asking a few key questions: What plants are you growing? Indoors or outdoors? Do you need fast drainage, high water retention or organic certification?” said Daniel Jacques, grower services manager for Sun Gro Horticulture. “From there, retailers can guide customers to the right product, whether it’s Sunshine Mix #4 for crops need extra aeration (or) Black Gold All Natural Potting Mix for a wide range of plants.”

Kevin Richardson, Managing Member at Organic Plant Magic, recommended buttons for employees that say “Ask Me,” as well as having employees recommend the products they grow in. It can be a powerful testimonial to point to a beautiful plant on the shelf and say, “We use this soil to grow these.” They, too, offer educational opportunities to retail employees and they find the staff is more engaged and enthusiastic about a product after learning all they can about it.

“People want to feel empowered and encouraged and confident. If the staff feels that way, they can transfer that to

their customers,” Kevin said.

Another interesting concept Kevin mentioned is the idea of having a dedicated sales person for a few key products. For example, if you’re making a big push on soil on a busy May weekend, have one person who’s trained up on those products exclusively dedicated to talking to customers about it, engaging them throughout the store, and even in line at the register, to make sure they have the right soil for their needs and asking for the sale. How much more could you sell if someone was actively engaged in promoting it (you could do this with fertilizer, too).

This has to do with framing the sale, too. It’s not just adding product to the cart—it’s making sure the customer has the right tools when they go home to be successful with their new plants (more on this in a bit).



Sun Gro Horticulture offers multiple brands, many of which have products that are OMRI certified.

Display Strategies

Of course, you can’t talk to every single customer on a busy Saturday in May. It’s just too busy. That’s where displays come in. Chad at Rosy Soil recommended having soil mixes throughout the store in a variety of locations paired up with plants, pots and at the register. Especially indoors with houseplants, this is a great way to show which specific mixes go with which plants.

Real talk for a minute: Bagged soils aren’t always easy to merchandise, especially large ones for outdoor use. They break open, causing a mess. They can get dirty or if they’re left in the sun too long they can fade. Left in the rain and broken, they get muddy. They are, in short, a challenge.

One way to combat this is to have them inside, or under a covered overhang or a greenhouse where they’re at least out of some of the elements.

Another great way to offer service is to have a list of barcodes at the register and train cashiers to ask if the customer needs any soil. The cashier scans the code, checks them out and the customer drives to a loading spot where an employee loads up the bags. The caveat to this is the customer has to know which soil they want. If they don’t, it’ll hold up the line.

Signage is also key, and Daniel at Sun Gro noted clear signage, comparison charts and even sample displays with plants grown in different mixes can help visually demonstrate the difference.

Pat noted they have Bumper Crop product guides that retailers can use at point-of-purchase or at the register for more details about their products. One other thing about the Bumper Crop products—they’re color-coded: red for Soil Builder, blue for the Potting Soil and purple for the Raised Bed Mix. This is a visual guide for customers and an easy way to call out the right product for the job.



Promotions

This is really where independent retailers can shine. Multiple people noted plant guarantees tied to the purchase of soils was a great way to ensure the success of the customer and get the right soil in the cart.

Bumper Crop bags are color-coded for easy recognition for the customer. Red is for the Soil Builder and Blue is for the Potting Soil. The new Raised Bed Mix will be in a purple bag.

“Retailers should have a Guarantee Program, which includes soil and fertilizer,” Kevin said. “Organic Plant Magic’s best IGC retailers have a guarantee program that includes Organic Plant Magic fertilizer and soil. This ensures your garden center business and customer success.” One of his customers calls it their “Recipe for Success,” and offers the guarantee with trees and shrubs.

Daniel also provided another option to create loyalty through bundled promotions. For example, buy two bags of soil and get a plant free, as well as offering reward points for soil purchases.

“By linking soil quality directly to better harvests and healthier plants, retailers can turn first-time buyers into lifelong loyalists,” he added.

Chad had some great options for shops with houseplants, like refill stations for soil. “We offer bulk soil options to retailers for this exact purpose and shoppers love it,” he said. “It keeps them coming back regularly instead of soil being a once-a-year purchase.”

He also said events and workshops like repotting days, soil education classes or quick in-store demos help customers understand why soil matters. “It turns soil into part of the fun, not just the heavy bag they grab on the way out.”

Continuing Education

The fun doesn’t stop once the customer leaves the garden center. There’s lots of education that can happen outside the store, like emails and follow-ups based on the weather, Pat said. If it’s rained a lot, he noted, retailers could send out emails with a reminder to replenish nutrients in the ground with a topdress of Bumper Crop Soil Builder to give the plants a boost. They offer a branded website, too, where customers can go to find out more information.

“If that customer loves Bumper Crop—and they always do—they’re not going to Home Depot or Lowe’s; they’re going to that independent garden center for that product because it’s exclusive to them,” Pat said.

Sun Gro works with retailers and professional growers, so they have a ton of expertise behind their resources, like the Black Gold Ask a Garden Expert service, as well as their blogs and videos from trusted horticultural personalities.

“Retailers can direct customers to these resources, helping them troubleshoot, learn best practices and feel confident in their purchases,” Daniel said.

Another avenue to continue dialog is social media. “If a staff member is a houseplant pro, showcase their tips online,” Chad said. “Customers love learning from real people they can trust.

“Educational content like this goes a long way toward keeping customers confident and engaged.” **GP**

More Resources

Bumper Crop website: bumpercrop.com

Organic Plant Magic website: organicplantmagic.com

Rosy Soil website: rosysoil.com

Sun Gro website: sungro.com/retail-products