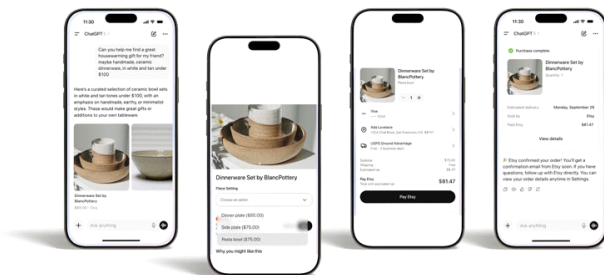


Features

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A New Bloom for Retail

Clint Albin



The U.S. consumer horticulture industry, a \$40 billion market, is on the verge of a technological transformation. With \$20 billion of that revenue from independent retailers—from local garden centers and hardware stores to plant shops and florists—these 25,000 businesses are about to face a new challenge and opportunity via a groundbreaking technology just announced on September 29 that promises to reshape how consumers discover and buy products. For local

garden retailers the question is not if AI will change shopping, but how fast.

The breakthrough is OpenAI's Instant Checkout powered by the Agentic Commerce Protocol (ACP). This new system is set to bring commerce directly into the chat window.

How Instant Checkout Works

Think of it as a seamless, in-chat shopping experience. Here's a quick look at the key features:

- **In-chat shopping:** A customer asks a question like, "Which perennials bloom longest in my neighborhood in Washington D.C.?" or "What is the best organic fertilizer for tomatoes in June?" The AI's response may include product recommendations with a "Buy" button right in the chat.
- **In-chat checkout:** The transaction is completed without the customer ever leaving the chat. The order, payment and confirmation all happen within the chat window.
- **ACP integration:** To be included in these results, retailers must enable their online store and product catalog using ACP.
- **Payments:** All transactions are processed securely through Stripe, with support for major payment methods like Cards, Apple Pay and Google Pay.
- **Single-item today, multi-item tomorrow:** The platform is starting with single-item purchases, with plans to introduce shopping carts in the future.

With Shopify support rolling out, more than one million merchants, including many garden centers, will soon be able to list their products directly inside ChatGPT.

The ACP is the standard that enables AI agents to transact safely and efficiently with retailers. For the horticulture

industry, this means garden centers can plug into AI-driven product discovery without needing custom coding. Their existing catalog data from prices to product descriptions can instantly become shoppable, potentially functioning as the digital shelf space of the AI e-commerce era.

Why AIO Matters for Garden Centers

Just as Search Engine Optimization (SEO) became critical for ranking on Google, AI Optimization (AIO) will determine which products are recommended when shoppers ask AI assistants for advice.

For example, when a customer asks, “What’s the best soil for roses?” AIO will decide which bag of soil appears first. If someone says, “I need a gift plant delivered tomorrow,” AIO will determine if your local florist service is recommended. The answer will depend on how well your website, product data and FAQs are optimized for AI-driven discovery.

Getting AIO Ready: A Retailer’s Checklist

Here’s how local retailers can prepare for this new era of commerce. There are essential parts of this checklist that single retailers can’t accomplish on their own and they should develop interconnected relationships with their vendors and other retailers to become visible in all AI search engines.

1. Website and content

- *Structured product data:* Ensure every product has accurate, structured metadata, including price, size and care instructions. AI systems rely on clean, machine-readable information.
- *Descriptive pages:* Create detailed, hyper-local descriptions for each plant, soil or tool. Use language that mirrors how customers actually ask questions, such as “shade-tolerant perennials in southwest MO” or “pet-safe fertilizer for low light plants in my living room.”
- *Mobile and API-friendly:* Make sure your site can be crawled easily and integrates with ACP-compatible platforms.

2. Product data management

- *Consistency matters:* Keep your SKUs, prices and availability consistent across your POS, web store and ACP feeds.
- *Attributes and use cases:* Include localized details like bloom time and light requirements, as well as use cases such as “ideal for balcony container gardening” or “native bee-friendly.”
- *Shipping and fulfillment:* Clearly mark which products are gift-ready, shippable or available for local pickup only.

3. FAQs and customer education

- *Natural language Q&A:* Expand your FAQs to address real customer questions like, “Which plants grow in clay soil in Zone 6b?”
- *Conversational formatting:* Write your content in a conversational style that matches how users phrase questions. This makes it easier for AI systems to extract and return your information.

The Market Opportunity in Numbers

Using a hypothetical garden center with \$2 million in annual sales and 35,000 annual transactions with a traditional 12-week spring peak, the discovery in AI search could mean the difference between paying bills and making profits. If just 5% of all independent garden center transactions shift to ACP-enabled AI commerce, the impact is significant:

- That's roughly 1,750 sales per store annually
- Across 25,000 stores that amounts to nearly 44 million AI-initiated purchases
- At an average transaction of \$57, this represents a \$100k increase per store and \$2.5 billion in sales volume for the independent sector

Even at 1% adoption, the volume would be \$500 million, which would be a meaningful share of the total consumer horticulture market.

Strategic Implications for Garden Retailers

1. **Incremental sales:** Retailers must determine if ACP drives new online sales or simply shifts existing in-store sales, which could tighten margins.
2. **Supplier advantage:** While fertilizer and tools are easily adaptable now, the ability to transact on hyper-local products will be a key differentiator.
3. **Florist disruption:** Direct AI shopping could bypass existing wire services, presenting a new business development opportunity for local garden centers.
4. **Control of discovery:** Those who master AIO will be able to control which products surface in AI conversations.

The Bottom Line

Instant Checkout and ACP could soon become the digital “endcap” where customer eyes go first. For garden centers, the path forward is clear: experiment early, optimize your content for AI and think strategically. In an AI-driven future, the successful retailers will be those who see ACP not as a threat, but as a new distribution channel where visibility in a chatbot matters as much as visibility on an aisle endcap.

The digital “endcap” for your business is no longer just on Google; it's moving directly into the chat window. This isn't just about offering convenience, it's about staying visible.

The entire system is designed to connect a customer's question directly with a product they can buy and it will only work for businesses that have an online store and product catalog. Without one, your business won't even be considered by the AI when a customer asks for a recommendation.

In this new era of AI commerce, your digital presence is not a nice-to-have; it's the key to unlocking millions of potential transactions and keeping your business on the map. Just as a physical store requires a front door, an AI-powered retail future requires an online storefront to be found and sell to customers. **GP**

Clint Albin is CEO of A24 Consulting and a member of the green industry for more than 30 years. He can be reached at clint@a24-consulting.com.