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Cover Story

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Elevating Poinsettias

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Poinsettias may be the plant of the Christmas season, but their widespread use just may be the independent garden center's greatest challenge By mid-November big-box retailers have already stacked carts full of uniform red 6-in. pots at price points IGCs can't—and shouldn't—try to match. In a market where the plant is often treated as a disposable seasonal commodity, independents have an opportunity to position the poinsettia as something more: a design-forward, gift-worthy, specialty item that reflects craftsmanship and creativity.

Mahoney's Garden Center highlights unique varieties and combinations to take poinsettias to the next level.

The differentiator in this equation is everything a garden center can build around the poinsettia. From offering uncommon varieties and artistic finishes (e.g. not just red) to presenting fuller, premium sizes and creating florist-level arrangements, retailers can elevate the poinsettia into an experience rather than a purchase. With thoughtfully chosen varieties, hands-on services and compelling looks, you can position poinsettias not as holiday loss leaders, but as profitable, high-impact plants customers can't find at any mass merchant.

Go Beyond Red

The poinsettia world is a truly kaleidoscopic place, whether it's natural or painted color. Why confine it—and your sales—to simply red? According to Mike Gooder, CEO and President of Plantpeddler in Cresco, Iowa, only 40% of the 150,000 finished poinsettias they grow are red. For the remainder of production they emphasize novelties, marbled, bicolors and multi-colored mixes.

"We try to stay very up on trend," Mike explained. "We try to encourage people to diversify out of basic reds … we

don’t believe in playing the commodity game.” Plantpeddler believes in giving their grower and retail customers opportunities in various sizes and unique combinations of the painted poinsettias to help separate them in the marketplace. “That’s our position as a company, to de-commoditize the commodity.”

So, what’s trending at Plantpeddler? Mike mentioned that the company’s long-running poinsettia open house for consumers is a good place to spot trends. When their open house was predominantly red, white and pink poinsettias, “you saw a very unexcited older crowd. We started putting in painted poinsettias in the open house and let visitors vote on paint jobs and colors and you saw a younger generation coming in and bringing kids. It really changed the dynamic of the customer.”

BYOC (Bring Your Own Color)



Painted poinsettias may be a controversial product, but there’s a nice niche market for poinsettias that have been sprayed and glittered—with a fair number of them being customized orders. And with anything custom, they can garner a premium price.

Hand-painted poinsettias are a specialty at K&W Greenery, and they have perfected their technique through years of trial and error to create true works of art.

K&W Greenery and specifically its President Chris Williams is considered one of the top painted poinsettia growers in the U.S. An idea he spotted at Cultivate, Chris took the idea back home and batted it around with his staff. Originally an employee who had an art degree handled the spray painting, but when he left Chris took over. “I’m not artistic at all but I like experimenting and trying new things. The “new things” that he developed are a set of distinctive techniques that elevate his poinsettias beyond the ordinary—blending, bleeding and so on. They spray each one separately, so each is unique. His daughter is now the lead painter and, according to Chris, “she’s added her own artistic style to it and has come up with techniques I didn’t even think of.”

Creating about 300 painted poinsettias each year, Chris finds that the most popular colors are blues and purples, with multi-colored or confetti styles gaining ground. Custom orders lean toward school and team colors. “It’s not for everybody,” he admitted, “but the people that do, they’re like, ‘Wow, that is really cool.’ It helps set us apart.”



Larger (and Smaller) Sizes = Bigger Impact

It’s not just color making a big impact—it’s also the size of the finished product. “It starts with a different growing philosophy,” explained Kate Terrell, President of Wallace’s Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa. “The growers growing for box stores are trying to fit X number on a rack, so they don’t grow them too big. We do the opposite since we’re growing them for the customer’s home. We grow 10-in. baskets and 12-in. deco pots, so we have big poinsettia bushes, whereas you go to a box store and you’re looking at a 6-in. red.”

Kate Terrell’s niece, Everleigh, helps show off the large 12-in. poinsettias Wallace’s Garden Center grows.

Wallace’s also focuses on offering a poinsettia that is gift-worthy, “more of a florist mentality,” as Kate put it, “rather than an ‘it’s Christmas and everybody should have a poinsettia’ mentality.” On the other end of the size spectrum, Kate says they grow a fair number of pixie poinsettias that are in 4- and 5-in. pots. “People buy them to put one in every bathroom, on the kitchen windowsill and generally

tuck them into places."

Elevate Through Design

Beyond color and size, creating a designed piece that incorporates poinsettias and other items is where IGCs can command premium prices for an exceptional product. This is where creativity and consideration of the customer experience reign.

Back to Kate's mention of selling poinsettias with a florist mentality, that's exactly what they do at Mahoney's Garden Center in Winchester, Massachusetts. "We offer a lot of custom planters throughout the store that people use as centerpieces, to decorate their homes and as gifts," said Julia Covino, Mahoney's greenhouse buyer. The staff also creates a number of custom containers based on requests. Items they use in these creative combos include kalanchoe, cyclamen, maidenhair fern, calocephalus (Silver Bush Plant), ivy and even hellebores.

Those additional plants never crowd but only highlight the unique varieties of poinsettias Mahoney's uses in these upscale holiday combinations. Sasha Ukrainets, head of Mahoney's florist department, said new this year for them is Sky Fantasy, a nice red with star-like white spots, as well as the hot- and light-pink Princettia Sparkling Rouge. "Because they are usually small, compact varieties, they're perfect as a 4-in., so are perfect for using in a mix container," Sash explained.



Plantpeddler is a grower and retailer that elevates poinsettias through combinations, like this one, called Holiday Bowval, and through this beautiful "living bouquet" of Roccostar Red and White.

Plantpeddler creates combos for their retailer customers, as well. The Birch Log is an 8-in. combination of a pixie poinsettia with various succulents in a birchbark container. Their most popular combination is the Holiday Bowval with cypress, hiemalis begonia and frosty fern. As for the Holiday Succulent Bowl, which incorporates several succulents, Sales Manager, Marketing, and Trials Coordinator Stacy Bryant said that being able to gift a combination from which the user can afterward save the components as houseplants is a part of the elevated value of the product.

In addition to mixed-species combos, Nikki Wolter, Production Manager at Plantpeddler, has come up with what they are calling a "living bouquet" with the two colors of Roccostars—Red and White. "They have two different habits, with the White less vigorous than the Red, and we're putting them together," Nikki said. "It gives you a bouquet look." They are pairing this with a special container—an 8-in. with a higher profile—so it literally looks elevated!



Elevate with Experiences

The real advantage IGCs have over big box stores is their ability to create experiences. Customers are looking for creative and community-building activities, and with some preparation, garden centers can help them make holiday memories.

Mitchell's Nursery & Greenhouse invites customers in for tours and a poinsettia open house to show off its variety of poinsettias.

For instance, Mahoney's offered a Make-and-Take Poinsettia Garden class for the first time in December. "We wanted to teach people how to create their own centerpiece," Sasha explained. "They could choose different colors of poinsettias, cyclamens or Princettias, kalanchoes, so they could really learn how to choose the color combination, how to plant and take care of it. We were really excited by that event."

Mitchell's Nursery & Greenhouse in King, North Carolina, uses its popular annual open house and tours of the nursery and greenhouses as a way to elevate and build excitement around its poinsettia crop. "They can see all that color at just one place," Judy Mitchell said. And with 77 different poinsettias, that's a lot of color! "It's not like a big box where it is just all jumbled in." Thanks to the open house's longevity—22 years—and that mass of holiday color, Mitchell's always garners some local television time, too.

Over the years, Plantpeddler has worked with Meredith Corporation, publisher of titles such as Better Homes & Gardens, on multiple occasions, providing a wide range of poinsettias—including painted and novelty varieties—for use in consumer articles and magazine photo spreads. "We worked with them on a piece about novelty poinsettias, and we were happy to showcase these different poinsettias because really, for some people, it's the only way they're going to see those novelty varieties," said Stacy.

The garden centers that thrive are the ones that refuse to treat poinsettias as commodities. By leaning into creativity, quality, variety and experiences, independents can offer something mass retailers simply can't replicate: a sense of discovery and community. When you elevate the plant, you elevate your brand in your customers' eyes and their entire holiday shopping experience. **GP**

Tips for First-Time Painters

- Don't be afraid to experiment. Try different combinations to see how color interact with different varieties.
- Practice on smaller or less perfect plants before attempting larger or higher-value poinsettias.
- Recognize that different white varieties absorb paint differently. Pure white shows color most vividly while creamier whites create subtle effects.
- "Practice makes better." Experimentation and repetition improve results.