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Features

2/27/2026

Revving Up Container Revenue

Wendy Komancheck



Photo credit: Steph Green/Contained Creations.

"Container gardening is a gateway to interacting more with our gardens—introducing new plants to experiment in our landscapes," said garden coach and container designer Jennifer Ott of My Thyme Gardens in Macomb, Michigan. "New gardeners and younger generations are used to seeing plants in pots and dealing with them on a smaller scale, which doesn't seem as overwhelming. We have introduced them to houseplants and now we can transition them to the outside."

An example of a window box combination with dwarf shrubs, annuals and perennials (and even mini pumpkins!).

This was one of many common themes that emerged from my conversations with three container garden designers about the range of options garden centers can offer to increase revenue in their stores.

Partnering With Container Designers

As a garden retailer, you're attracting customers to your front door with one-of-a-kind container gardens. Container garden designers, on the other hand, go to their clients' homes to create planters. Independent container designers develop relationships with their customers, including understanding color preferences, the angles of sunlight on porches and patios, and the architecture of their homes.

Gina Khalifa, owner of Urned Elegance in Exton, Pennsylvania, designs containers for customers in the Philadelphia suburbs. "I believe that clients are looking for a luxury type of service [container garden design]," she said. "Clients want something colorful and eye-catching in their planters for the outside of their house, every season, for immediate gratification. They don't have the time or the creativity to even know where to begin."

Steph Green, owner of Contained Creations, spent over 10 years designing and installing planters for clients, and now teaches container gardening through online courses. She agrees with the differentiator between container garden designers and garden centers, noting: "It's very different when you're a garden center. You already have access to all of those plants and you have the power to inspire consumers to buy what they need to create their own beautiful containers.

“When I offered custom installations for clients, one of the biggest advantages was being on-site. I brought everything to them and could design and edit in real time. I knew their sun exposure, the size of their pots, their style and their color preferences. That hands-on familiarity and full-service dynamic made the process completely different.”



Photo credit: Gina Khalifa/Umed Elegance.



Photo credit: Jennifer Ott/My Thyme Gardens.

Top: Incorporating tropicals and houseplants in containers can keep those sales rolling through summer.

Bottom: Consumers can learn about new varieties and types of plants through experimenting with containers.

However, can garden centers work with container designers to improve their revenue? All three designers agreed partnership is a great way to increase your retail garden center revenue while adding a vital service to potential clients.

“I think the best way for a garden center to generate repeat container business is to demonstrate what it really takes to fill a planter each season. Whether that’s a sample container with printed ingredients and instructions, or a hands-on workshop that results in a stunning arrangement, having a finished container on display alongside the plants makes all the difference,” Steph said.

She goes on to explain that for late winter and early spring, demonstrations can include creating a container with heather, hellebores and fresh evergreens.

“If I worked at a garden center, I’d create a huge display of my favorite container plants and then I’d have a pot mocked up to show people how to arrange them. I’d repeat the process for each new season … more frequently during the busy spring and summer months. If you make it easy for customers, they’re more likely to buy in. ‘Here are the ingredients you need and here’s what your finished product can look like,’” Steph added.

Gina said garden centers can partner with container designers by introducing a unique service: Taking planters to homeowners. While you may offer a service of updating their pots throughout the year, most customers can’t or don’t want to bring the pots or urns back to the store for refilling.

“Instead of having that client bring their pot or their planter or their container to the garden center, the garden center can contract with the container gardener on site and then have the designer go out, assess the containers, the lighting—where the sun hits the container. And the designer uses the inventory that the garden center has to create these planters,” she said.

Creating Demand

Jennifer suggested container gardens as great gifts. For example, when you know what your customers like, the colors and type of pots they use, you can provide gift cards for specialized planters or even a gift card to attend one

of your garden center's workshops.

"Workshops are huge. I see how my friend Liz, owner of Evergreen Flower Farm, is offering workshops and they're selling out right and left … and that's just out of her garage," Jennifer said.

"She also created a take-home DIY kit and that completely sold out, too. I just started a workshop on winter sowing this Monday and Tuesday, and I was surprised by the questions I got, such as, 'Is this for beginners?' As designers and horticultural professionals, we can create a simplified product, reduce some of the decision-making, and then it feels doable to the customers," Jennifer added.

Steph noted it's far more convenient and helpful to have the ingredients where the demonstration or workshop is being held.

"Don't make them [the customers] go to Lowe's or Home Depot to buy their potting mix. Don't make them go online to order a pot. Don't make them run back to the houseplant section to find the perfect Majesty Palm. Make it so easy that they can't resist. And offer bundled pricing—maybe a discounted rate for buying a bag of potting mix and several of the container plants you're featuring that week. Plant people love a good deal," she added.

Create Unique Planters

Tropicals and houseplants can sell at higher volumes if you use them creatively in pots. For example, Gina uses croton for summer planters and into the fall before the first frost.

"I do plant a lot of tropicals and I do offer to repot them for indoor use when I'm pulling them out in the fall. The croton's colors become more vibrant in the cooler temperatures—as the temperatures change in the evening, the leaves of a croton get more vibrant, like more orange and more red … they look fabulous in a fall container," Gina said.

Steph suggested window boxes as unique planters for homes—including urban ones that may not have a front porch. You can add young or dwarf shrubs and ornamental grasses, as well as English ivy and other eye-catching annuals.

All three container garden designers agree that consumers want a full, mature-looking planter—no matter what season it's in.

"I think they're [the customers] looking for something large—they want the 'wow' factor. They don't want something that looks like they just planted it. When we, as container gardeners, plant our containers, we're going for the 'wow' factor, so we're overfilling that container that it looks like it's been planted for three to four weeks already," Gina said.

As garden retailers, you can take these key ideas and potential partnerships to drive revenues, rather than trends, with your planters this year. **GP**

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