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Cover Story

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Breaking the Overwatering Habit

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Walk into any garden center and ask about the most common cause of #houseplantfail, and the answer is most likely water. Not too little of it, but too much.

Overwatering remains one of the leading causes of houseplant loss, but it's also one of the most preventable. With the right messaging, merchandising and staff training, retailers can turn that mistake around for everyone involved.

Reminders via fun stickers at Aster Gardens.

"Everybody kills stuff [by overwatering]," said Amanda Thomsen, owner of Aster Gardens in Lemont, Illinois (and *Green Profit* columnist). "Because everyone in the world has other things going on."

Even experienced plant people like herself get it wrong, Amanda admitted. For retailers, the reality of overwatering presents both a challenge and an opportunity: helping customers—and staff—break the cycle of chronic overwatering.

"The number one question with customers is, 'How often do I water?' And that's not the right question," Amanda said. That mindset sets them up to fail. Instead, retailers should guide customers toward observation. Amanda continued, "The question is, 'How often should I be checking my plants?'"

Rigid schedules ignore the factors that actually drive plant health, including light, temperature, humidity and plant type. As Leticia Tojer, houseplant department manager at Heeman's Garden Centre in London, Ontario, explained, "Each houseplant is different. They come from different parts of the world, they've evolved in different environments, and so they have different watering needs."

Teach Through Touch

One of the most effective ways to shift behavior is also the simplest: get customers to use their senses. Amanda's go-to advice is straightforward—she even has cards scattered across her store that proclaim the technique: "Stick your finger in the soil to feel for moisture. Water deeply when dry. Never let it sit in water."

Justin Hancock, horticulturist at Costa Farms, reinforced that approach with another tactile cue—weight. “I found that what makes a good connection with people is the weight,” he said. “When you pick up the pot, the wetter it is, the heavier it is. For some reason, that is super obvious to people, in a way that some of the other tips don’t seem to be. You sort of know, ‘Oh, this is heavy.’”



Sus-tee moisture meters are a simple and easy way to help customers water properly.

Together, these touch techniques give customers an intuitive framework that’s more reliable than going by a calendar reminder. Retailers can reinforce this learning in-store by encouraging customers to handle plants. A properly watered plant becomes a reference point and something customers can feel and viscerally remember when they get home.

Explain the Why

Leticia takes education a step further by explaining why watering matters.

“Once people understand the why, they make fewer mistakes,” she said. Her approach doesn’t rely on technical jargon but on relatable concepts. She explains to both customers and staff that plants are made up of as much as 85–95% water—compared to humans’ roughly 70% water makeup—and depend on it for essential processes like photosynthesis. Without proper watering, growth slows, stress increases and plants become more vulnerable to pests and disease.

She also encourages customers to think about where plants come from. A cactus adapted to arid conditions and a tropical Monstera evolved in completely different environments, so watering them the same way—even displaying them on the same bench—easily leads to failure.



Make Watering Visible

In-store practices can reinforce these lessons in powerful ways. At Aster Gardens, Amanda and the staff use a mobile “Care Cart” stocked with watering and maintenance tools, bringing plant care directly onto the sales floor. The cart has two tubs—one with a diluted organic fertilizer where houseplants soak for subirrigation, and one in which the just-watered pots can drain. “We are always watering and taking care of plants right in the middle of everything,” she explained.

Heeman’s Garden Centre adds watering instructions to stickers.

The Care Cart is a teaching tool, as well. Customers can watch the process, ask questions and see the proper watering technique for different plants in action. Even without a dedicated cart, retailers can create similar visibility by watering during open hours and talking through the process with customers.

Simplify the Message

Overwatering often stems from overthinking and overcomplicating the process. Clear and repeatable messaging is key. Along with Amanda’s simple advice about feeling soil, watering deeply when dry and watching that your plant doesn’t sit in water, she drives home the overwatering issue with signage that says, “Water ≠ love.”

At Heeman’s, Leticia uses plant tags to communicate essential care information, including customized watering

guidance. With hundreds of different plants on the floor, concise, plant-specific messaging helps customers make better decisions without overwhelming them.

“As retailers, we need to help our customer successfully nurture the plants they purchase from us,” said Louis Damm, Canada Business Manager for Dramm Corporation. "This means engaging with our customers in conversation on their plant purchase as often as we can, bringing their attention to care tags or websites to create happy customers. The result will be thankful customers who return to your business for future purchases.”



Merchandising Can Prevent Mistakes

How plants are displayed can influence how they’re watered. “Just like we talk about zoning plants outside, zoning your plants inside can potentially limit overwatering, too,” Justin suggested. For both customers and staff, grouping houseplants by water needs can help prevent someone from falling into the habit of watering everything at once. Justin says this can prevent the mindset of, “Well, if I’m watering this one, I should water the one right next to it, too.”

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Leticia added that matching plants to customer lifestyles is just as important. A frequent traveler may be better suited to a self-watering system or low-maintenance plant, while a more hands-on customer can manage species with higher water demands. “This is something that I always recommend, to think of how much time they have, think of their lifestyle,” Leticia said. “A houseplant should be something that brings you joy, that makes your life better. It’s not supposed to be a chore.”

Pairing Products with Education

Products can support better watering habits, but they are not a cure-all. Simple analog moisture meters such as those from SUS-tee can be helpful, especially for larger plants. Self-watering pots can reduce guesswork if used correctly. Justin noted improper use of these pots, such as overfilling the reservoirs, can still lead to overwatering. He explained that the new Twist.Lift.Water. self-watering pots from Costa Farms help consumers prevent both over- and underwatering through its wicking system.

Leticia said that pot selection for customers also matters. “For plants that need less water and don’t like to have their roots wet for too long, I recommend clay, because clay has pores and dries out naturally,” she explained. “If you’re a busy person who is always out, don’t put your tropical plant in a clay pot, because it’ll dry out faster.”

Train Staff in Skilled Watering

Behind the scenes, consistent watering starts with staff training. “Training garden center staff should carry over to good advice to the consumers,” said Louis. “The challenge in the garden center is management does not view the task of watering as a skill that requires training. This results in over or underwatering, which leads to mortality and shrink and no sales.”

Leticia agreed that watering is not something employees can master quickly. “It’s a skill. It’s not knowledge,” she says. “Everybody gets watering training, because it’s a very important job.” At Heeman’s, watering training program is broken into manageable steps. New hires start with basic concepts of why watering is important, then the focus turns to specific plant groups, followed by supervised practice. Responsibility builds gradually as employee confidence increases.

Leticia implemented watering reports, where staff log environmental conditions and track what has been watered, helping ensure consistency across shifts. “I want to get them into the habit of getting the weather forecast information and using it to inform their watering decisions.”

Louis has record-keeping advice for both consumers and employees: “Use your cell phone to take pictures of the plants,” he suggested. “Each time a plant is watered take a picture. Your phone will date the pictures for you. This will help you establish healthy routines that lead to healthy plants.”
These in-house systems for watering matter because poor watering doesn’t just affect the plants themselves. It affects customer perception. “The consumer sees [poor-looking plants] and makes the observation that if the garden center cannot properly take care of the plants, then how are they going to succeed with plant care at home? The result is no sale,” Louis said.

Helping customers avoid overwatering starts with building confidence at the staff level, which ultimately trickles down to the consumer.

“Root health leads to overall plant health,” Louis said. “Quality plants that have received proper care lead to a confident consumer, which leads to ‘green profit.’” **GP**

> **6 Ways to Prevent Employees from Overwatering**
> 1. Train watering as a skill, not a task. Don’t assume staff will “figure it out.” Create a training program and reinforce it over time.
> 2. Teach observation, not schedules. Encourage employees to check plants daily rather than watering on a set routine.
> 3. Use simple sensory cues. Feel soil moisture and lift pots to judge weight.
> 4. Group plants by water needs. Keep succulents and tropicals separate to avoid “water everything” habits.
> 5. Implement systems and tools. Use and sell “Care Cart” products such as wicking containers, water meters and subirrigation techniques.
> 6. Track and communicate. Create a simple watering log so staff know what was watered, when and under what conditions.