greenPROFIT

Kiss My Aster

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Perennially Yours

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Perennials are my first love and what I wanted to focus on when we opened the courtyard. Sheesh, did I get hit over the head with that one. Apparently just deciding that's what you want to do and then doing it isn't the way things are done.

When we opened, I set up pallets of perennials for both sun and shade and did not arrange them by name or family. I set them in themes, color and texture—arranged from shortest to tallest. Each pallet had a kicky name and I changed them each year: "Hot Girl Summer," "Yard Anarchy," "Cottage Core," "Tropigoth" and "Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle*" were a few. They were so sexy!

Guys, I did not sell many perennials.

My customers were at "what's an annual versus perennial?" not where I needed them to be, which was "OMG, I love Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle. I get the reference now, let me have those Digitalis ferruginea and Brunnera Looking Glass!" I still hold that the idea of organizing by theming is solid, my timing was not. They did NOT get it.

Also? People are weirdly polite. They "felt bad" about wrecking my displays. I wish they "felt bad" about trying to flush too much toilet paper instead.
My beefy perennials displays were overwhelming and people are shopping here more for ideas and inspiration than for nuts and bolts, so when I received the go-ahead to keep the courtyard this year, I knew I had to shake things up.

So this year I've doubled down on annuals, pre-made pots, weird tropicals and ambiance. Can you sell ambiance? 100% yes. I still have perennials and a way bigger native plant section and I'm doing very well with them. I'm mostly pulling in things that look amazing from the wholesalers as opposed to bringing in massive orders that will look great in the future. I don't have the space and apparently, my customers don't have the bandwidth. I have had three people ask me "what's a garden center?" so I really have to dumb things down while staying really crafty!

The courtyard is now more modular, so I can move things for classes and events. The pallets were pretty much immovable. I now have little stair stepper shelves I can move around and direct traffic flow how I want it.

The downside is that I have to handpick perennials weekly instead of receiving orders but there is some added benefit to that. There are zero surprises in how something looks and I don't accidentally order something I don't

want.

People are not shopping here for waves of color, they are looking for one or two of something weird they've never seen before. I do have a hard time sourcing things they've never seen before but I keep trying! And I get closer to growing our own every day.

When we first opened, I couldn't imagine someone coming up to the register with two Dicentra, a 4-in. annual and two houseplants but now that is a completely normal occurrence. I'm so happy to say that our customers continue to grow with us and I have to take a pause to realize that some of that must be our doing.

Will I go back to the themed pallets? I hope so. I thought it was a really clear way to sell perennials and shrubs together as a package EVEN THOUGH it did not work at all. I think with educating and training our customers, who get more read every day, that those themed pallets will be exactly what they're looking for. Or at least I can hope. **GP**

Amanda Thomsen is a funky, punky garden writer and author with her own store, Aster Gardens in Lemont, Illinois. Her store info is at KissMyAster.com, and you can follow her on Facebook, Twitter, Threads AND Instagram @KissMyAster.

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*Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle is one of the worlds largest dollhouses and was completed in the 1930s. I believe it would tour the country so people could go see it but it's been at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry since 1949. I grew up OBSESSED with it as I'd assume any little girl that grew up in this area would naturally be. Again? I am wrong about so many things.