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Cover Story

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Arranging for Impact

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Perennials can be one of the most challenging categories to merchandise well. Unlike annuals, they're not always in bloom so don't always command immediate attention. Add in the sheer variety available to today's gardeners and the result can be a retail space that feels overwhelming rather than inspiring.

Example of themed tables at Buchanan's Native Plants in Houston, Texas.

Arranging perennials alphabetically had been the industry norm for decades. The most a retailer may have strayed from that technique was to separate sun-loving plants from those preferring shade. But times have changed and the need to turn perennials into profit is now much greater.

Sort by A-Z. Sort by color. Sort by garden solution. There are as many different ways to arrange perennials as there are garden centers selling them. But across the industry, growers and retailers agree on one thing: there's no single "right" way to arrange perennials. Instead, the most successful garden center strategy is to combine several different methods while being sure to add in some inspiration. The focus now is to create displays that help customers navigate the nursery space while also encouraging them to imagine what's possible in their own gardens.

Start With Assortment

Before layout even comes into play, the breadth of what's offered has a measurable impact on sales. According to Katie Tamony, Chief Marketing Officer for Monrovia, a recent consumer study the nursery conducted with global insights platform Swytchback, looked at how plant size assortments impact sales. Overall, the study found that increasing both variety and size options can significantly boost customer engagement and purchase volume.

"Our study found that If you have say, five varieties and only in 1-gal. sizes, then you probably are going to reach about 83% of shoppers and they're probably going to buy just one plant," Katie explained. However, expanding that assortment changes the equation quickly. "If you stock 16 varieties on a bench of 1-gal. plants, then you're going to have an average of 2.4 purchases per shopper and reach 95.7% of shoppers."

Even more compelling is the role of plant sizes. “If you have 16 items that are a mix of sizes, you’re actually going to reach 99.3% of shoppers … but, more importantly, they’re going to do about 3.8 purchases per shopper,” Katie said. “Sizes really drive shopping and drive interest.”



Lead With What Looks Good Now

While assortment sets the stage, what customers see first often determines whether they engage at all. That’s why many retailers prioritize displays fronting the perennials section that are filled with plants coming into peak bloom.

Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, Maryland, changed this section from natives to the Pollinator Café to allow for more plant selections that aren’t necessarily native, but attract a wide range of pollinators.

“We try to keep the first tables up front to be filled with color, a little bit of everything that is in bloom for that week,” said Isabela Chamorro, Perennials Product Line Manager for Mahoney’s Garden Center in Winchester, Massachusetts. “Every week we change this area a little bit.”

That regular refresh of the display keeps the shopping experience dynamic. “I don’t think customers want to see the same display every week,” she said. “‘Oh, I didn’t see this plant last week, interesting.’ It’s just to show our variety.”

Jerry Schmitt, Senior Live Goods Buyer for Stein’s Garden and Home’s 17 locations in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, region, noted that even in more structured layouts, bringing blooming perennials forward on their own or in an in-bloom display is key to selling success. He used a few seasonal plants as an example.

“When phlox is blooming, phlox comes front and center and out of the alphabet,” he explained. “And we just brought in a whole bunch of lupines in 2-gal. pots and every store has 50 to 75—they’ll feature those in a spot of their own because they are just getting ready to crack color.”

Build a System Customers Can Shop

Behind the beautiful plant displays, a clear organizational system is still essential. Many garden centers rely on a familiar framework to make browsing intuitive.

“Our approach is generally alphabetical,” said Megan McMullen, Perennials Buyer at Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, Maryland. “We mostly arrange our plants in a sun area and a shade area by alphabet.” Other garden centers work off the alphabetical arrangement, as well, including Mahoney’s.

This structure benefits both customers and staff. “It’s easier for our employees to unload new product, to make sure that they’re grouping the right product together,” Megan explained. Just as important, consistency helps repeat shoppers feel confident navigating the space. “We try to keep that fixed as much as possible throughout the season so you know where lavender is.”

Larger operations may take a different approach. “I tend to display by brand,” said Jerry. “Due to our size and the sheer volume, it’s a lot easier for me to put all of my Proven Winners pots together, for example.” Within those branded sections, however, Stein’s uses alphabetical organization to maintain clarity.

Sell the Outcome, Not the Plant

For some retailers, the biggest gains come from rethinking organization entirely—not around plant type, but around purpose.

Stein's Garden & Home trialed the new EZ Scape program from Proven Winners highlighting plants for landscapes and saw a 40% increase in sales with it thanks to encouraged sales of multiple plants (which look better in the landscape, too). More information can be found at ezscapes.com.



"The most important thing is not arranging by color or alphabetically—it's by theme," explained Marta Lafaver, Garden Center Manager for Buchanan's Native Plants in Houston, Texas.

Buchanan's specializes in native plants and Marta admits that many of these "don't look great" when they're small in pots and containers. "But if I put that green, weedy-looking plant on the bee and pollinator table with big banners that say bee and pollinator or hummingbird plant … the plants that we put on themed tables turn more than twice as fast as the plants that we put on just regular, non-themed tables," Marta said. These themed and well-signed tables have become a primary driver of sales.

The success of this strategy comes down to understanding your customers' intentions. "Our customer base isn't coming in with a list; they are coming in saying, 'I want to do a pollinator garden.' Or 'I just want to fill the space with something that isn't going to die,'" Marta explained. "They just know what they want the garden to do. That's why we changed what we did and it's been very successful for us."

Jerry at Stein's believes that some customers want to be told what to plant to create a beautiful garden. That's why they've trialed the EZ Scape program from Proven Winners.

"We ended up doing about a 40% increase on year one with it," Jerry said. "But it was more about what we did in multiple sales." The key, he explained, is how the program uses signage to prompt bigger purchases. "When you have suggestive signage, it works really well to get customers to maybe not buy just one or two plants, but to maybe buy multiple plants to complete the garden." For shoppers, that kind of direction simplifies decision making.

Let Signage Do the Selling

Across every merchandising approach, signage plays a central role in bridging the gap between plant and purchase. Homestead Gardens' popular Pollinator Café is a central area in the nursery that serves two purposes: It showcases great pollinator plants and it allows the store to highlight what's looking beautiful. "We encourage folks who are looking for plants that bring pollinators into their garden or who are looking for native plants to kind of head toward that direction."

At different times, this area had been signed as natives and Maryland-area natives. They've changed it to Pollinator Café for this reason: "It allows us to expand the definition a little bit because there are many, many plants that are excellent for pollinators that are not strictly native," Megan explained. "Calling it the Pollinator Café rather than a native Maryland section gives us a little bit more flexibility to provide different plants at different times."

Marta takes a more targeted approach, using signage to create new reasons to buy. "We make signs that say, 'I host the sulfur butterfly,'" she said. "We stick these signs in the plants that need that extra boost," pointing out that even less visually appealing plants can become top sellers when tied to a meaningful benefit.



Design With the Customer in Mind

Ultimately, the most effective perennial displays are shaped by the people shopping them. Understanding customer behavior can lead to simple changes with significant impact. "You have to adjust the way you market your customer base," Marta suggested.

The A-Z lineup at a Mahoney's Garden Center location in Massachusetts.

For Isabela, that means rethinking product placement entirely. "I started thinking about the customers," she explained. "Our biggest customer group is seniors. We had roses all the way in the back, and I said, 'No, we should bring them to the front and have easier access for seniors." The result was immediate: "That was probably the best year [for roses] that we had."

Keep It Fresh: Rotation, Seasonality and Newness

Even the most thoughtfully arranged perennial department can lose momentum if it stays static. For many retailers, regularly refreshing displays on a weekly or monthly basis is key to maintaining customer interest and driving sell-through.

At Buchanan's Native Plants, that strategy has become a core part of how slower-moving inventory gets a second life. About six years ago they implemented a native-themed table with a big banner.

"We started putting just the plants that weren't selling by themselves on that table and they turned," said Marta. That rotation isn't random—it's tied closely to seasonal relevance and customer needs. "At the end of the month, we are getting rid of our rain garden table and making it a mosquito repellent table."

The common thread is a willingness to adapt. Rather than treating displays as fixed, successful garden centers view them as evolving tools—ones that respond to the season, highlight what's most relevant and give customers a reason to see something new each time they visit. **GP**