

TPIE Cool Product Awards, Henri, Gen Alpha and TJ's customer faves



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TPIE's Cool Product Awards

Last week I promised you more great finds from TPIE, and a great place to start is with the items your garden center peers spotted while walking the trade show floor. Many of them did so to help choose this year's TPIE Cool Product Awards. In all they chose 15 items. I presented the plant winners in this week's newsletter—find those [HERE](#). Below you will see the remaining seven winners that are all superb products to stock at your store.

Banana Bloom Natural Soil Booster from Banana Bloom. Long story short here: The father of this company's founders took the family to live on a working banana farm in Nicaragua for several years. In commercial banana harvesting, the entire trunk is chopped down, and one of the small pups at the base is left to replace that tree. Well, what to do with all those trunks? Use the fiber as a soil amendment. They say this fiber is hydrophilic, meaning it holds onto moisture much more efficiently than peat moss or coconut coir, so you'll use less of it. It's regenerative and doesn't require chemical processing. I spoke to the fellows and am told they are working on

different fiber lengths. The current product is 5mm and they say 10mm fibers are really good for propagation. They are also experimenting with “chunkier” presentations.



Dirt Bag, Coco Bag and Sphag Bag from BWH Plant Co. This operation started as many young, entrepreneurial plant businesses do—in a pull-behind trailer set up at breweries and other venues selling plants. “We were making enough to pay our beer tab,” said one of the founders as she accepted the Cool Product Award. The trailer led to DTC sales, which then led to their own plant store and now their own products. Their line of soil mixes and amendments are simply yet boldly packaged—and you just can’t forget a name like Dirt Bag, right? I checked out their booth and they also have lots of other plant-aligned products I’ll mention in future newsletters.



Trellises, supports and more from Floratrel. The unique designs of Floratrel’s trellises, supports, plant stakes and more are crafted from bamboo. All of the designs are laser cut at the company’s facility in Maryland. I was impressed with the array of designs they had on display in their booth. They even offer custom creations. That would be a great idea for special events at your garden center. And I believe all of the in-soil portions of the supports are protected with a

coating for longer life.



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The Last Four

Leaf Sweep from GOHA. GOHA founder Kieran Collins wanted to create an easy way to clean leaves and other portions of indoor plants. Picture a pair of simple kitchen tongs but with soft pads—two different types, one for wet, one for dry—on the working ends to dust and clean leaves. The brush heads can swivel to present two different sizes of swiping widths depending on leaf size. Appropriate for interiorscapers, too.



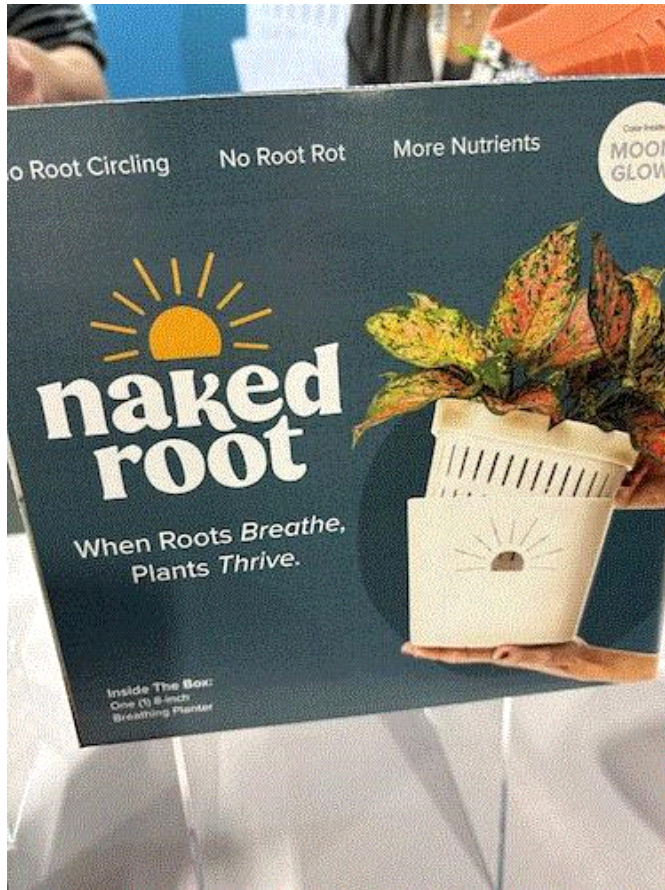
“The Dude” Garden Gnome from Henri Studio. This studio’s designers are always imagining such creative products. Think of “The Dude” as a Big Lebowski-type gnome, livin’ his life as carefree as can be. That includes wearing shades, flip-flops and floral swim trunks being pulled down by a little crab attached to his rear. Dude, so cool! He’s handmade of cast stone and finished in a Greystone paint wash. And as Henri Studio is proud to say, The Dude and all the other products they offer are made of and in America!



By the way, Jen Polanz reports on her tour of Henri Studio further on in this *buZZ!* Informative! Read it below.

Root Pruning Pots from Naked Root. I spoke to the founders Frank and Lisa at length about this product and I tell you, I haven’t met such enthusiastic plant people in quite some time. I

mean, we're all plant people but these two—wow! They created this slotted pot-in-pot line to allow roots to breathe more freely, avoid water-logged soils and to encourage air root pruning. They put a lot of hard work, research and joyful enthusiasm into creating the product. Available in several different sizes and colors. And if you can't tell from the photo, the pots are translucent so you can see the water level. Also made in America!



Repotting Scoop & Teaspoon/Soil Pick from Sol Soils. This company has already taken home quite a few awards from TPIE and other shows for their lines of soil mix-ins and amendments. This time they are being awarded for their repotting scoop and teaspoon/soil pick. Use the scoop to mindfully place soil into pots when you're repotting—way more accurate than using your hand and spilling soil all over the floor as you're holding back the plant's leaves (that is my *modus operandi*). The other device is a two-in-one wand, if you will. One end has a teaspoon measure to measure out their Sol Biotics products, and the other end is a pick with which you can poke around in the soil and so forth. Handy tools are the best.



TPIE's People's Choice

Three Favorite Trending Product Awards were given out this year. These are essentially People's Choice-type awards, voted on by attendees as they stroll through the Product Showcase display. One is familiar and the other two may not be.

Let's start with the familiar one. That would be the **SUS-tee Watering Checker** from **Cabinotier**. This has won Cool Product and Retailers' Choice Awards in previous shows. There's nothing necessarily new with the design of the product—don't mess with near-perfection!—but what I did note was that they are now offering replacement filters. These filters should be replaced every six months or so. For folks like me who don't want to needlessly throw out/recycle plastic before absolutely necessary, these are a welcome addition.



Costa Farms received the award for their new **Twist.Lift.Water.Pot**. The design was driven by consumer feedback on their challenges when using self-watering pots. Users can twist the top ring to lift it and the inside grower pot off the solid pot. The user can then refill the reservoir and replace the grower pot. It's available in two sizes, two pot designs and two colors. By the way, Costa has determined from their sales data that white is the most popular deco pot.



I did a very poor job of describing that process. Here's a [VIDEO](#) of Costa's Justin Hancock doing a much better job of it—and with visuals!

And the third Favorite Trending Product Award was given to the **Sunseeker 6 Acres Robot Lawn Mower from EE Zero**. Who wouldn't want a self-propelled lawn mower! It's not just for private homes or municipal green space mowing. Use it to mow under your nursery trees or orchard. What a hunk of a machine.



Spotting a Green Thumb

The next product is not a TPIE winner but is a winner of National Garden Bureau's Green Thumb awards that I mentioned a week or two ago. **Unique Gardener** won the Professional's Choice Award for Garden Product for its Water Plants terrarium.



But they have so many more products! They have five different collections of their Tiny Terrarium line, plus a mini desert collection, moss bowls, mini tropical gardens, a dinosaur-themed mini garden and loads of other things. I spoke to the owner (I lost all of my cards from TPIE so I can't remember his name) who said these products hit all the categories—gifts for kids and for gardeners of all skill sets and any interest. And self-gifting, too, of course. Mini things are all the rage now, I hear. Unique Gardener has plenty of mini products to offer!



The Cacti Collection is just one of five Tiny Terrarium Collections from Unique Gardener.

Behind the Scenes: Henri Studio

Note: This is a sporadic series from colleague Jen Polanz that she would like to start writing based on visits to vendors and suppliers for the independent garden center market. She has a few done already, and if you'd like her to come see how you make your products, please [email Jen](#) and we'll see if we can set up a visit.

On a fall trip to the Ball Horticultural Company headquarters in West Chicago, I made a side trip up to Wauconda, Illinois, to visit with [Henri Studio](#) owner Frank Honold and receive a tour of the statuary and fountain manufacturing facility.

Frank started his career in product management before serving in various leadership roles in the corporate world. The opportunity to buy Henri Studio came about in 2012, and he and his wife Jill took it, and fell in love with the art and science behind creating beautiful pieces of garden art. "There's joy in it—there's true joy," he said. It was clear as we walked through the multi-story facility (about 70,000 sq. ft. on the main floor and a 50,000 sq. ft. mezzanine) that he was in his element and enjoyed the process of creating.

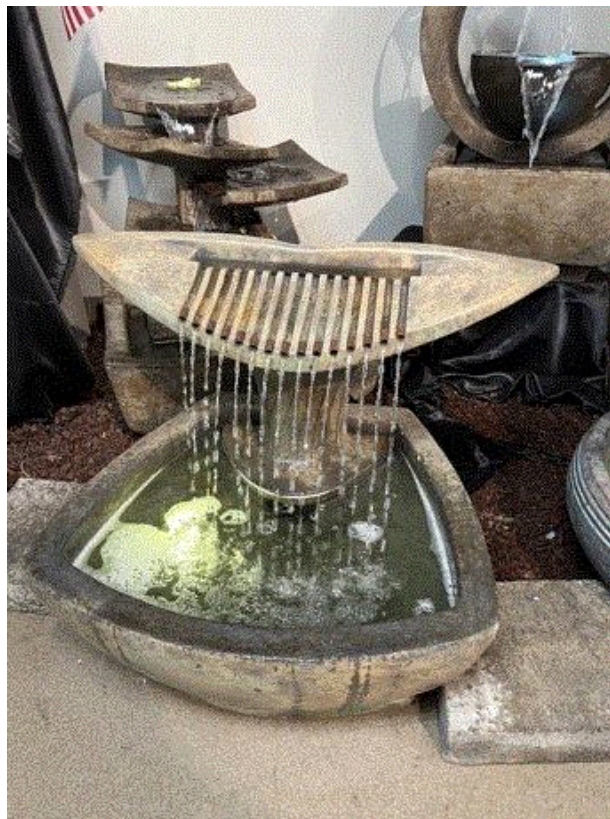
We started with the showroom full of fountains, statues and other works of art. Frank and his sculptors consider everything from structural integrity to water movement, sound, light and form as they develop their creations. Some fountains, for example, are louder and some more quiet, and many use copper spills to guide the water's movement. There were statues of all types, too, from colorful college mascot gnomes to traditional animals, religious statues and more.



This is just one wall of fountains and statuary in the Henri Studio showroom at the Wauconda, Illinois, facility.

Next, we made our way to the sculptors' studio. He has two full-time designers who develop concepts for statues and fountains (Frank also comes up with ideas, and they take suggestions from customers, too). One designer has a Disney background and is able to create that magical nuance in characters Henri Studio produces. They were working on new concepts for introduction in fall 2026 when I visited, which means everything is done a year in advance.

They create their designs first in foam, testing water flow and structural stability before sculpting in clay, high-density foam or plaster. Once they're satisfied with the design, they create a final sculpture and then make the final mold. This requires multiple coats of latex rubber and many pieces of structural fiberglass enveloping the entire piece to give it rigidity.



While the official name of this piece is Pacifico, it looked to me like a whale's tail, which is another common descriptor for it. [Click here](#) to see it lit up at night with its LED lights.

Production is Time Consuming!

Jen Polanz continues her Henri Studio tour.

Production is a time-consuming process, involving multiple steps from assembling the mold and casting to demolding and pre-finishing. Then the products go outside to cure for at least seven days before final finishing, resulting in heavy duty concrete statues and fountains that are designed to last for decades. Henri trucks in tens of thousands of pounds of stone and sand a day to make their concrete mix, which is a blend of Illinois sand and cement, Indiana limestone and Lake Michigan water.

The finishing process involves acid stains that "bite" subsurface into the concrete lime structure, creating beautiful color combinations. Some are even painted or airbrushed before being staged for shipping.



Henri Studio offers a wide variety of bird baths, too, like this unique acorn-shaped one.

Shipping is its own process, as many of these pieces are very heavy. They get placed into triple-wall boxes with burlap and other packing material to ensure they safely get to customers in one piece.

With the entire process, it's really amazing to me how they can offer so many options to their customers. Each mold lasts for a few hundred casts before they have to be remade. Frank said, too, they are constantly tweaking and improving existing product lines to make them even better.

Their busiest part of the season is between November and February, when the worker ranks swell by about 20% in order to get all the art shipped out to independent garden centers across the U.S. and Canada in time for spring sales. If you'd like to see more of what Henri Studio offers, you can schedule a visit to the showroom at the Wauconda facility.

I had no idea the process was so complex, and next time I see garden statuary and fountains, I will have a newfound respect for what it took to get to the garden center sales floor.

Thanks, JP! Can't wait to see where else you tour!

Let's Talk Gen Alpha

The bit above about the gardening gifts from Unique Gardener prompted me to include the following. Moving to the next generation on the doorstep of consumerism was bound to happen sooner or later. **Gen Alpha**—those who were born between 2010 and 2025—are in the consumer conversation now (well, maybe not those born in 2025). According to a survey by MG2 that appeared in **Chain Store Age**, the older members of Gen Alpha (tweens and younger teens) prefer immersive, in-store shopping experiences.

The survey polled children ages 8-14 and found that 73% favor physical stores over online, 97%

want to help brands with design decisions and 60% say trying products is the best part of shopping in stores.

Another survey finding that I find *very* interesting (and would not have been the case when I was that age): 70% of the Gen Alpha survey respondents report that adults in their lives often purchase items they suggest. What does all of this tell me? Have more samples! Unbox those mini terrariums and gardens or whatever kids gardening-related products and let the kids get the full experience.

Other ideas? Drop me a line about them [HERE](#).

TJ's Customer Choice

I mentioned People's Choice-type awards above a couple of times. Do you do something similar in your store?

I ask because Jen Polanz—always the thinker—received her Trader Joe's e-newsletter announcing the company's 17th Annual Customer Choice Awards Winners. They include winners in 11 different product categories along with the top five runners up in each (see them all [HERE](#)).



Trader Joe's messaging is simple yet hits their mark (I bolded it):

*"You voted, we tallied, and now the winners of the 17th Annual Customer Choice Awards are ready for their close-ups! Click below to survey these Victors of Value, then head to your neighborhood Trader Joe's to pick up your favorites. **And while you're there, pick up a prizewinner or two that are new to you.**"*

Said Jen of Trader Joe's strategy to introduce customers to new products, "I would love to see a retailer divide their offerings up into sections and run an awards program like this! You could use it in store with some signage such as "Customer Fave!" and send it out in an email like this. I just learned about so many products I wasn't sure if I should try, but now might because so many people voted for them."

You may highlight a "Staff Pick," but polling your customers broadens the user experience.

Maybe offer customers an incentive for filling out a survey form. And if you already do something like this, **LET US KNOW!**

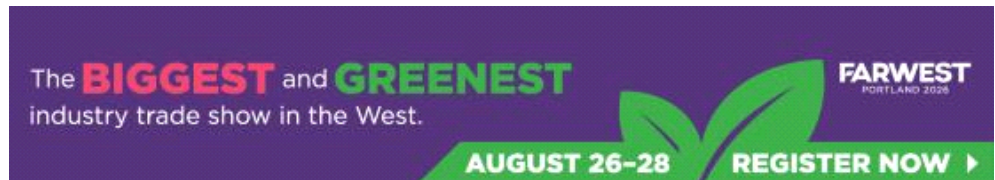
If you have any questions, comments, suggestions, etc., drop me a line if you'd like at ewells@ballpublishing.com.



Ellen Wells
Senior Editor-at-Large
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