

Columns

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The Garden Dispatch: Love That's Local

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Ever wonder where Cupid shops? With online competition and the economy still a bit dismal, you may find yourself hiding under the covers rather than hunting for creative ways to drive winter business to your garden center. Like they say about love or the answers to life, it may be smack-dab right in front of you. So, open your eyes and clean out those ears. Listen to the buzz—buying local is in.

What better time than the month of February to carry your region's "best of everything," right in your garden center? Set the stage for finding that unusual Valentine's Day gift—a local one to boot—and you may cultivate happy, repeat customers. This could take some extra planning, networking and cajoling. But every area has local, often overlooked, talent waiting to be discovered.

Need some ideas? Let's give it a go:

Check out local handmade jewelry designers. Funky floral earrings, bracelets or necklaces for the lassie would be a great selling feature next to a pair of pruning shears, hats or gloves. Who says garden gals aren't chic?

Tap into your local artisan beat. Haul in earthy pottery or cool garden sculptures. Place it near the flowering indoor plants in your greenhouse and something is bound to catch the perusing eye. May I suggest a local band, acoustic guitarist, violinist or whatever suits the mood for your garden center entertainment? Folks typically love easy-listening music while browsing, and most aspiring musicians beg to be heard. Now that's a win-win.

What better way to a consumer's heart than free local snacks and nibbles? Add regional flavor with artisan cheeses, wines, honey, cider—there is so much "local" that has a horticultural twist.

Don't forget the reading type. Surely there is at least one critically acclaimed author, editor, TV host or personality in your area. If not, find an awesome landscape photographer who might be willing to host a class at your place. Depending on the size of your facilities, you may need to stagger all this regional talent coming out of the woodwork.

Craft your days and weekends with a constant local buzz about who's coming next to your garden center. Social media is a great way to spread the word. Or, you can always take the old-fashioned approach—hang posters in your favorite haunts or snail mail a classy postcard flaunting the local photographer's work. Beautiful imagery has impact.

Short on time, dollars or both? Create one of those snazzy bulletin boards. You can encourage your local farmers to display a brochure about their products, where they sell it and when it is available. People gravitate to these informal centers of information. Place a suggestion box for the shopper's input, too. You might get some awesome ideas or just some useful feedback.

Concerned that this "local" thing is too much work and won't generating enough winter sales? Remember, you're in the service business, which can be a tough row to hoe these days. But it can also be incredibly rewarding, too, especially when you garner feedback or potential repeat business. Tickling the curiosity and pleasures of a customer is what this industry is all about.

If the above doesn't convince you, put yourself in your patrons' shoes. Where would you want to go on a cold, blustery winter day? An overgrown box store stacked floor to ceiling with the same old stuff from China? Or a happening garden center loving that it's local?

I pick local! **GP**

Annie St. Jean-Bilowz writes a daily blog, Annie's Gardening Corner, and is a partner in crime at her husband's landscape architecture business, while making time to hunt for great garden centers and hidden local treasures. She resorts to playing her Gretsch drum set with lots of cymbals if the skies don't permit outdoor frolicking. For your ear protection, let's hope for sunny weather.