

Columns

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Mini Gardening Gateway

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Love 'em or hate 'em, miniature gardening, fairy gardening and terrariums are hot right now. I happen to love miniature gardening and creating terrariums so much that I wrote an entire book about it that's coming out this spring. *Shameless self-promotion!* However, the reason I'm writing about that topic is not for my benefit, but for yours.

The thing about making money by selling “projects” (which is, essentially, what miniature gardens and terrariums are) is that you end up with customers who have made a substantial initial investment in materials for something that they may or may not know anything about. These relatively expensive materials (including plants) can easily add up to \$150 or \$250 once the cash register stops ringing. Plants, a container, some furniture, potting medium and other accessories that, together, cost as much as a pair of designer shoes can fit into a shockingly small shopping bag.

I made a mini-garden for my Grandma with items from a local garden center in my hometown (I was there visiting) and the total for the materials nearly gave me a heart attack. It shouldn't have been a surprise because I was elbow-deep in the book and had already visited the (very patient and accommodating) garden center where I live to pilfer their shelves for supplies.

I don't say all of this to get you to reconsider stocking miniature garden accessories, fairy garden supplies and terrarium products as a sales category, but rather to encourage you to consider how to do it to help your customers be successful.

Stress that Miniature Gardening is Still Gardening

I've been to non-garden centers that sell terrarium supplies and have seen succulents planted with shade-loving tropical plants. Ain't nobody gonna be happy about that situation a few weeks after the garden leaves the store and goes home to roost. What happens then? It's possible that your customers, used to 100% money-back guarantees from non-garden related merchants, will come back to you—not to buy more plants and accessories, but to complain about how everything in their little gardens died.

You can kill it in this category by modeling good gardening behavior—planting like with like (light requirements, water) in demonstration gardens—and merchandising plants that have similar growing requirements together. You might go so far as to set up separate displays clearly marked with signage for

succulents and for tropical plants with accessories in between them. Don't just sit a bunch of stuff out and expect people to make the right choices!

Merchandise books with plants and accessories or create pamphlets or flyers that explain how to care for miniature gardens growing in different conditions—indoors and out, in the sun and in the shade, planted with tropicals or planted with succulents. Help your customers understand the difference between growing a covered terrarium and one that is open, and a miniature garden in a container with a drainage hole and one without.

Fairy Gardens: The Gateway Drugs of the Gardening World

People love fairy gardens and terrariums because they're so dang cute. Kids love them because they're kid-sized. Adults love them because these gardens are an "appropriate" way to recapture some of the charm and fun of their youth without being creepy. Many people who start fairy gardening haven't gardened before. This might be their first experience caring for plants.

So, try to do what your customers may not: put the plants first. In addition to fun and whimsical accessories, stock a wide variety of good-quality 1-in. plants. Talk to people browsing in the fairy garden section not just about the theme of their garden project, but also about where they plan to grow the garden and their gardening experience in general.

It's possible, with a bit of extra attention, to get first-time gardeners to upsize from miniature gardening to full-sized gardening and win a customer for life. **GP**

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