

## Features

2/27/2014

### All Eyes on Spring

*Ellen C. Wells*

As folks in this industry know, forecasting the future is futile. With wavering consumer confidence, a just-recovering economy and a fickle Mother Nature, all bets are off when it comes to predictions. However, there are certain signs that industry veterans and experts can spot far off on the horizon. *Green Profit* has asked these garden pundits about what excites, concerns and intrigues them about the horticulture industry's next few months.

#### Color Story

Reporting from very far off the eastern horizon is Stacy Sirk, an Amsterdam-based retail product and visual stylist. Each new year she tours the European shows to note home and garden trends and more importantly, how they might fit into a retail setting.

For example, in Paris all the container vendors of note were featuring bulb forcing. "In glass, in metal, in ceramic, in wood—really a big return to larger pots, indoors and out, with bulbs rather than cut flowers," Stacy notes. They normally show some, she said, but this was truly across the board and in large quantities of bulbs.

"Another thing I noticed was a lot of vendors showing flowering plants in pots the same color; it was striking," notes Stacy. "Paris is a high-end show, so they really look to move fashion forward. "This [paired pots and plants] was new, and a great way to highlight your best brights."

Stacy sees this spring filled with lots of soft pastels, mixed with strong metallics (coppers and gun metals, in metals and ceramic) and mixed with natural wood in blonde to medium hues. "Focus on soft whites and pastel flowering plants, and metallic plants, those with silvery green, golden green and black foliage," Stacy says, then mixing up the color stories, ethnic metals with glossy contemporary glazes. Another tip: Avoid patterns and go for texture, providing surface interest in solid colors. "Go for all kinds of whites, then the softest pastels, followed by the brights you feel are right."

#### The Radical Thinker

Garden center consultant and *Green Profit* columnist Judy Sharpton is someone who advocates using a "beginner's mind" when approaching a retailing question or dilemma, whether it be for the first or the 50th time. This beginner's mind technique leaves the trends reports behind along with notions of what the

commonplace solutions are in favor of seeing the situation fresh and with an endless array of possibilities. This can lead to what might be called radical options that have not been tried in this industry setting before.

“The ideas my clients are developing are low budget, controlled and worth the experiment,” says Judy. “Some are technology transfers from other successful retail models. My role has been to advise on placement in the store and to offer some product naming options.”

The message behind her clients’ willingness to become radical thinkers and problem solvers isn’t lost on Judy. “What all this experimentation tells me is that there are those out there who have decided, ‘The way we’ve always done it,’ is the most dangerous sentence in business,” she notes. “They are right.” But what’s more important is to test and experiment with these solutions to see where it leads. “We are a ‘me too’ industry,” she says. “Even before these options have been tested, stores could be counted on to jump on a new idea, even without thinking through just how well a particular product or service fits that store’s model.”

## **Pumped for Spring**

Kate Terrell of Wallace’s Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa, and a Community Connector for AmericanHort’s Retail Community is seeing this coming spring as a breath of fresh air after several years of stagnancy. Kate is pumped about what she sees coming this spring.

This winter’s deep freeze will translate into spring fever at a fever pitch. “We’re seeing it already with our garden seminars we do each Saturday,” Kate says. “This past weekend we had 3 in. of snow and temperatures about -15F, and we still had 60 people show up for a lecture on moles and rabbits.”

“We’ve had so much snow cover and so much sub-zero weather—as low as -50F and we are technically zone 5 or -20F for hardy plants, and I’m wondering about plant death despite the continuous snow cover,” Kate says. The concern is about the plants Wallace’s has warranted. On the annuals end, Kate believes people will spend more on and do more with annuals. Tree- and shrub-wise, she sees customers needing to do a lot of replacing. “We’re going to have to come right out of the gate with knowledge on post-winter care of what to do with plants that are winter burned, salt burned and are generally struggling.

A new store manager and new merchandiser, both with a “What if we moved this to there?” attitude, mean that there is a new energy and new way of looking at the store. “Everything is cleaned, rearranged, painted and ready to go,” Kate says, who notes the customers are already noticing it. “Our customers are looking for change. We’re changing our advertising, the way our store looks, our merchandising—we’re trying to give them a whole new fresh start on everything.”

“People are still holding tight to their money so we are trying to focus more on value,” Kate says. With the new manager’s help, Wallace’s is planning more events this year, such as a June Garden Party, a pet care-advice event with a local popular vet and newspaper columnist, a Vino Van Gogh painting and wine tasting event, and chef demonstrations. “We’re trying to do more events that aren’t necessarily garden-related but that we think our customers would like,” Kate says. “We’re hoping events like that will get some new people in here and get them to see our gift shop and buy plants.”

Something you don’t hear everyday: “I’m excited about patio furniture,” Kate says. Their sales were good last

year and new housing in the area is skyrocketing. “All these homes they are building are putting on giant decks,” she notes. The two departments that have been up and down in recent years—trees and shrubs and patio furniture—are both positioned to be up this year. They are even producing an 8-page, full-color flyer newspaper insert just for patio furniture. Kate hopes the outdoor room concept may get reinvigorated this year.

Considering all the new homes with barely-there surroundings, Wallace’s is also producing a flyer with four landscape options. The four options go from DIY level up to master designs.

## Justin’s Take

Justin Hancock can see two sides of the garden center checkout, thanks to his former gig as online garden editor for *Better Homes and Gardens* and his current position as consumer marketing and digital specialist for Costa Farms. We asked Justin for his take on what garden retailers should be considering this spring.

Fragrance: “At *Better Homes and Gardens*, I was seeing the interest in fragrant plants grow every year. I don’t think that is going away. After all, what’s the first thing most of us do when see a pretty flower? Go in for a sniff. I think retailers should definitely keep this in mind, especially for the most-trafficked parts of the garden center. The more senses a plant can engage, the more appealing it becomes on an emotional level and the more it feels like you’re getting what you pay for.”

Houseplants: “I know I’m biased since I work for the largest grower of houseplants in North America, but I’d love to see houseplants break out of the house and into shade gardens this spring. With downy mildew still on the prowl, consumers are having to find alternatives to impatiens. Why not bring tried-and-true, tough-as-nails plants such as snake plant, Chinese evergreen, spider plant and peace lily outside for a tropical touch? Since you can bring them back in the house before frost come fall, they’re a fantastic investment, too. We put together some mixed containers with annuals and houseplants and they received an excellent response from most everyone who saw them.”

Social Media: “It’s not going away and having a good social media presence is a perfect way to reach out to consumers who are new to the category. We have an amazing advantage in the gardening category: Just about everything we grow is beautiful and photographs well. Retailers can help drive a ton of excitement about plants—especially given how tough this winter has been—with a little extra effort on the social media side.”

## All About the Customer

Katie Ketelsen has a perspective similar to Justin’s, also being a *Better Homes and Gardens* alum and now brand ambassador for Big Bad Flower. What follows is what Katie sees coming down the pike in the coming weeks:

What excites me: Personally connecting with our customers through our Big Bad Members program. I’m looking forward to encouraging our customers to try a new plant this year, being there to offer bragging rights, but also counseling them when they’ve overwatered their succulent. I’m also giddy to help make the full-circle connection between gardening, eating and living. We know plants are so much more than a pretty face. Our customers need help seeing how an ornamental blueberry makes a great foundation plant, has multi-season

foliage appeal, looks great on a Saturday morning table spread, and tastes fabulous.

What concerns me: Our industry is wasting a lot of energy hating. We need to refocus our efforts onto ourselves, making our businesses better, making our customers smile and congratulating our competitors. Yes, I said it. Give 'em a viral pat on the back.

What intrigues me: I'm no fashionista, but I pay attention to the trends coming out of the fashion industry. For example, Marc Jacobs is opening a pop-up store in New York where no money will exchange hands. Transactions will be done solely based on social media creativity. Whether you know, or care, about Marc Jacobs, is beside the point. Think of the possibilities with this kind of experience!

What retailers should be focusing on: Subtle ways to thank your customers. Think of what puts a smile on your face (finding a forgotten \$10 bill in your jean's pocket), and try to deliver that feeling to your customers.

What retailers should be aware of for Spring 2014: There are three kinds of customers, and you should try to appeal to at least two out of the three.

- **Full-fledged DIYer.** Tell me everything about making a rain barrel, and I'll put the pieces together myself.
- **Semi-DIYer.** Tell me everything about making a rain barrel, so I can purchase the mostly constructed barrel from you, to be installed by me.
- **DFYer (Done For You).** Tell me a little bit about it, so I don't flood my basement, but I want you to put it all together for me. GP



## Outside Advice

**Alison Kenney Paul**

**Vice Chairman for U.S. Retail & Distribution with Deloitte LLP and has been involved in retail strategy for many years.**

At February's Garden Center Success conference (part of New England Grows in Boston), I had the opportunity to listen to a fantastic presenter who shared some extremely critical and timely retail information. Alison Kenney Paul is the Vice Chairman for U.S. Retail & Distribution with Deloitte LLP and has been involved in retail strategy for many years. She shared some thoughts on how local garden centers should evolve to meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's consumer.

Here are her five takeaways:

**Go Digital & Social.** 19% of IN-STORE purchases are influenced by mobile devices and shoppers using mobile devices in the store have a 40% higher conversion rate (to purchase). It's time to make sure you have WiFi throughout the store and that your sites are mobile friendly. In addition, incentivize your best fans/customers to take to social media and sing your praises. Pick true fans so the praise is authentic.

**Create the store of the future.** The role of the store is changing and the increase of online commerce is the driver. Make your store a destination and community gathering place. Change your team culture so that your staff talent is focused more on service than the actual transaction.

**Use data to personally engage customers.** Alison made the great point that if the local pizza place knows your address and pizza preference when you call or go online, then any retailer can personally engage customers. Identify your top customers and message to them. Use the data to enhance customer retention.

**Communicate your core values.** The Millennials (Gen Y) want their lives to have a purpose and they support companies that embrace the same ideals. Define and communicate your company values. Advocate for a social cause. Share your values using social and digital vehicles. For examples, check out TOMS shoes and Life is Good clothing.

**Leverage in-store technology.** Alison made the statement that in the near future, physical payments (cash or credit cards) will be obsolete. Keep an eye on online payment systems like Paypal, Square and Twitpay. And look further out to technology like Google Wallet and even fingerprint or eye-scan payment methods. Her advice is to Pilot, Test, Learn and Reapply—basically test some of these new technologies AND be ready to fail with some. But fail fast. Innovation requires failures.

—Bill Calkins, IGC business manager for Ball Seed