

Features

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Once, Twice, Three Times a Design

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When I give talks to garden centers and to my own private clients on container design, one of the BIG takeaway lessons that I stress over and over until it sinks in is that container design should never be static. Even long-term designs, such as a container with a Japanese maple in it, will eventually need SOME kind of love and maintenance or transferring to another sized container even. This is the point in the discovery of how containers can be used when I see the light bulb go on—"I have a chance to try something new!"

Sometimes we overlook the idea of giving "permission" to the customer to do what they wanted to do anyway, whether it's ripping out a shrub they've always hated and replacing it or changing their container plants. For whatever reason, they didn't feel they could or should. If a customer wants to spend money on new plants, I'll give them every reason to feel like they're accommodated!

The vast majority of our customers want that luscious-looking color they're tempted with over and over on our websites, Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter and magazines. And the garden center will only have two to three opportunities to capitalize on this seasonal transition.

Who's Your Customer?

I mentally break up my container customers into three groups:

- 1) The "Early Birds" who buy container plants when it's not even warm enough for a geranium yet. They get all excited about seeing ANY color and buy up all of those primroses, pansies, violas, stock and snapdragons.
- 2) The mid-season, "Party People" who are having a Mother's Day dinner, housewarming party, bridal shower, graduation party—you get the picture. They want color and they want it NOW!

The first two groups are really easy to please for the most part. At times, they're totally happy taking a pre-planted hanging basket out of the greenhouse and plopping it in a container and faking it for an occasion.

The third group however, is where the real sales opportunity awaits. I call this group, the “It Has to Last” group. These customers may or may not be customers from the first two groups earlier in the season, but either way they tend to come into the garden center much mellower; the sense of the spring rush is over, the dog days of summer are looming and they’re ready to invest in YOUR design ideas, spending what it takes to make a container beautiful longer term.

The customer strolling in during July, August and September when it’s slower and less frantic, needs to either completely re-design a container or simply tweak a pot and slip in a few new fresh plants that can hold up until—or in some climates—even through winter. This is NOT your petunia customer. This is the person who is open to new ideas, new designs and new plants that they may have never considered in April.

This is also the time of the year to teach the customer “why” a container in transition is actually using their containers for the highest and best use from the standpoint of illustrating the value proposition. When you’re spending money on “investment” plants, they can go out into the landscape after a season and grow on and then be divided eventually.

How about introducing them to container plantings that have “multiple personalities”? This means having more than one point of interest from bloom to interesting foliage to fall color.

Some Go-To Late Summer Ideas

Try these examples and see what your customers think!

- The Hypericum Ignite series is a fantastic option—LONG-lasting blooms, berries, fall color, lots of options for colors.
- *Amsonia hubrichtii*
(pictured above)
—It has gorgeous, multi-season interest with its magnificent fall color and texture.
- *Brunnera macrophylla* Silver Heart is a favorite of mine in every way, from bloom to foliage.
- Euphorbias of all types are fun to try for magnificent early season blooms, but even more for the foliage in the later season.
- Heuchera, heucherella and tiarella are all fabulous foliage options. Some of them have lovely blooms, too, and it’s a wonderful plant to sell for the hummingbird enthusiasts.
- Sedum or *Stonecrop hylotelephium* are long blooming and come in wide array of choices that are easy and beautiful from Neon with hot pink flowers to Matrona with luscious darker foliage.
- Asters are available in a wide array of styles for containers and go so beautifully with the grasses and bold foliage in late season.
- This is a great time to introduce them to new and different cultivars of ornamental peppers, coleus and even some “houseplants” that can last outside until the fall temperatures get really cold. **GP**

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