

Columns

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Specialization and the Index of Awesome

Amanda Thomsen

I'm a garden center addict. It's true. And a few years ago, I decided I was going to make a website that had a total index of all of Chicago's garden centers on it with brief descriptions of what they specialize in and also some reviews from customers. Think of a cross between Yelp! and TheThriftShopper.com. I was going to rate and describe all of the area's garden centers myself and, I'm sure, bring home a trunk full of plants from each one. I never got around to making this site 1) because it's a crazy idea that would take all my time and 2) I had a baby instead. I'm pretty sure I made the right decision there, but I never stopped thinking about it.

The thing is, most garden centers do have a "Thing," but some do not. For some garden centers, the description on my make-believe website would be "just a regular garden center" and, man, how I'd like to discourage that. You must have a "Thing" and you need to let people know about it. What's your "Thing" and how are you sharing your "Thing" with the world?

What are "Things"? For me, I have one place I go for great perennials, one place I go because I never know what I'm going to find and I'm in the mood for a treasure hunt, one place has THE BEST hanging baskets you've ever seen, and one place has amazing succulents. I never mind that I can't "one-stop-shop" because my life would be sad and empty.

When I talk to non-garden-center-addicts, you know, regular people (AKA Muggles), they ALWAYS ask me "where's the best place for pots?" or "where do you get weird hostas?" and I'm ALWAYS able to get them excited about driving 40 minutes to some place they've never been before. I wish it was easier for them and then I start thinking about making my silly index again. What if there was a magical garden shop index that people could search for what shop has great pots, maybe see some photos of their selection and a little pricing before they drive? Who would type in their thing as "our friendly and knowledgeable staff will rock you like a hurricane"? Who specializes in 4-ft. Brugmansia trees for \$30? Who specializes in potting stuff up for customers while they wait? This winter I would have killed for an index of who had spruce branches that were longer than 2-ft. long. Geez, don't make me pick up the phone and explain what extra-long spruce branches are 12 times. I just want to pop it into a search box and go.

Would it be so bad for all garden centers to band together so that, ultimately, customers can more easily find stores and the things they're looking for? I think it's a kooky request coming from an industry that sometimes has a hard time having any web presence at all, for sure. In my mind, every garden shop should have a site

with current hours, specials, total current availability and photos of the bathroom. But that's just me.

I'd love to be a stranger in a strange land or say, Iowa, and open an app on my phone that lists local nurseries and what they do best. Why isn't this a thing? I talk all the time about how someone once mentioned there was a place in Indiana that had \$3 1-gal. clematis. If I could search an online index for \$3 clematis ... I cannot type for I have such intense goosebumps right now. I mean, I'd buy a round of clematis for all my friends.

Would a total index of garden centers be a benefit to anyone? Other than me? **GP**

Amanda Thomsen is now a regular columnist in Green Profit magazine. You can find her funky, punky blog planted at KissMyAster.co and you can follow her on Facebook and Twitter @KissMyAster.

