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Growing the Gift Market

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As of late, retail garden centers have conceded the potted plant gift market to mass merchants, grocery stores and florists. However, if a retailer operates year-round, this market can be one option to keep customers coming in consistently and provide income in off months.

Garden retailers, though, have to be smart in how they approach this segment and they have to differentiate themselves from the products sold at competitors. One way to do that is to partner with the creators of potted plant lines that offer extensive support for their products, like Aris' Keepsake Plants line. Marketing Director Christine Kelleher notes growers of their lines are given a Stages of Development chart with the optimal bloom for shipping.

"Plants have more sales appeal and sell through more quickly at retail," she adds. They offer the Keepsake Azaleas and Tradewinds Hibiscus lines, which come with consumer care and handling sheets so customers have more success with their gift plants.

I also talked with Chris Pesche, third-generation owner of Pesche's Garden Center & Flower Shop in Des Plaines, Illinois, who was very optimistic about independents being able to create a niche with gift potted plants.

"What most independent garden centers have to do is be creative and use your imagination," he says. You can't just offer potted plants and call it a day."

Here's a list of some items Chris says a potted plant gift segment should have:

• A wide selection of pottery and baskets merchandised nearby so customers can choose what to put their potted plant in.

• Something to wrap the gift plant in. Examples include burlap, satin bows, raffia or even fancy poly foil. Something to make it look like a gift.

• Customers love to decorate their gift plants with something special, like a bird, butterfly, bumblebee, ladybug or other small item.

• Stakes may not seem that important, but they really are. They convey the spirit of the gift (balloons, a holiday, a thank you, get well soon, birthday or other message). Spinners are also a great add-on item for gift potted plants.

• Unique plant material for gifts. This is where retail garden centers can really excel. Think outside the box for what makes cool gift plants. Succulents are all the rage these days. Different holidays can have different plants. Pesche's forces hellebores into bloom for Christmas, as well as offering cyclamen and poinsettias. (See the sidebar for more options.)

Chris notes that he pushes out his gift plant messages through email blasts surrounding certain holidays (at press time, it was Sweetest Day in October), as well as on his LED sign out front of the store. It's important, he says, to communicate you offer gift options, both through marketing and by being well-stocked when they walk in the door.

He also says it's important to identify where your opportunities are. Do you have a corporate park nearby? Those are great places to promote gift options for co-workers, Boss' Day and other work opportunities. Potted plants and dish gardens are appropriate for funerals and memorial services. They're also appropriate for church functions. Are they building new homes in your area? Potted plants make great housewarming gifts.

Chris cautions not to be disappointed, too, if you don't get it right the first go-round. Ordering for gift-giving is a tricky business.

"Unfortunately it isn't something that comes overnight. We've been in business for 90 years and it's something you really have to work on," he says. "You're going to overbuy. You're going to do too much, but you have to let the customers know you're there for presents, and when they walk in the door, they're not going to be disappointed."

> Here are a few common options for gift plants, but think outside the box, too:
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> > Guzmania
> > Rieger begonias
> > Anthuriums
> > Tropical Jasmine
> > Calla lilies
> > Foliage plants (crotons, low-light aglaonema, etc.)
> > Orchids
> > Mums
> > Azaleas
> > Hydrangeas
> > Hibiscus
> > Herbs (Rosemary, Lavender, etc)
> > Cactus and succulents **GP**