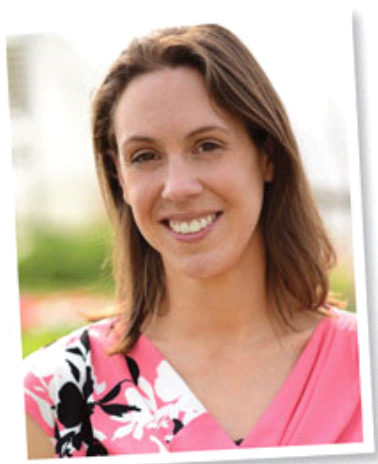


Columns

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Missing the Boat

Jennifer Polanz



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Edibles. It's here to stay (a trend, not a fad), and yet our industry hasn't capitalized on it nearly enough. It's frustrating to see the food industry take off, whether it's gourmet food, restaurants or CSA farms, and we're still treading water with our ornamental plants. Don't get me wrong—there's definitely a need for beauty—but we can serve a dual purpose for our customers: beauty and necessity.

To be fair, there are some in our industry who've jumped in head first and have made loads of headway with edibles. But by and large, I still see 4.5-in. tomatoes and peppers on benches barely marked surrounded by massive amounts of annuals with little to no education behind anything. When I say education, I mean the tools for successful growing, harvesting, using (recipes) and keeping (i.e. canning and

freezing).

So what are the barriers to selling edibles? Back in the beginning, I heard a lot of "I can't make enough on seed packets and 4.5-in. peppers." That's fair. But it's grown now to be so much more. Cooking shows on Food Network and unique restaurants like farm-to-table fare have expanded our palettes to now not only accepting kohlrabi in our diets, but to want to grow it in our yards, too. Plus, plants are great, but don't forget about pest controls, stakes, grow bags, tools and other essentials needed for growing and harvesting. If there's one area where there's tons of accessories available, it's growing edibles.

Personal story: This year we dove into a CSA driven by a co-op of local organic farms. It's been SO MUCH FUN going each week to pick up our share and see what we got. We dropped a fair amount of cash—in advance (when's the last time someone gave you \$300 in advance and had NO IDEA what they'd get for it?)—and it's been such a fun adventure incorporating our new veggies into dinners. It's reinvigorated our cooking and given the kids new flavors to taste. They don't love it all, but they try it.

You know what's missing with my CSA, though? We pick up at a karate studio. So when I need dill to pickle those cucumbers, I have to go somewhere else. I may go to the store, but if I picked up at a garden center, I would look for a dill plant right there. A garden center/CSA pickup is a great collaboration that drives traffic

and reaffirms the retailer's commitment to edibles and local agriculture.

There are lots of ways for garden retailers to get involved with the grow-your-own trend and we take a look at a couple of those options in this issue. Don't take my word for this growing trend (ha! bad pun), see Ian Baldwin's analysis of the latest National Gardening Survey for affirmation. Then turn to Katie Elzer-Peter's dissection of the future of edibles. Want more? John Johnston tells us how to keep the fun (and profits) going year-round with "Incredible Indoor Edibles."

It's not too late to get on board. The ship isn't in the open water yet—but the last horn is sounding. Are you on or are you off? **GP**