

## Features

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# The Sweet Smell of Success

*Randall D. Schultz*

Roses are the most popular flower in American gardens—and for good reason. A rose bush in full bloom is a centerpiece in almost any setting. Hundreds of varieties of rose bushes are available for garden center customers to choose from, with flowers that range in color from the pure white of a John F. Kennedy hybrid tea rose, the bright yellow of Julia Child floribunda rose and the deep purple blossoms of a Twilight Zone grandiflora.

“There’s nothing quite as beautiful as a healthy rose bush in full bloom,” said Christian Bédard, research director for Weeks Roses, which grows millions of rose bushes every year at its California growing facility in Wasco, California. “Modern rose bushes are both beautiful and tough in a wide range of growing conditions, so they are easier to grow than ever before.”

Here are 10 tips from successful garden centers to help you sell more roses—and sell them more profitably.

## 1. Get an Early Start

A successful selling season begins the year before customers arrive in stores to buy plants. Rose growers produce millions of plants each year and they do their best to predict which specific varieties will sell. But the most popular varieties sell out and so do the newest varieties.

“My busiest time for writing orders is from February to June for plants that will be delivered the following year,” said Stuart Miller, sales representative for Weeks Roses.

## 2. Stock a Wide Variety

The garden centers that sell the most roses offer the largest selection of plants that their store space allows—giving customers the widest possible choice. “Go with some of the old-fashioned roses that are tried and true,” says David McNatch, operations manager for trees and shrubs at Wingard’s Market in Lexington, South Carolina. “Also, carry plenty of the newer varieties that have increased disease resistance and are easier to maintain.”

According to several retailers, flower color is the most important factor when customers select a rose to buy. So make sure to stock the widest possible range of colors—and make sure to have plenty of reds, yellows,

yellow-oranges and pinks (the most popular colors for roses).

### 3. Start the Season with a Special Event

North Haven Gardens in Dallas, Texas, hosts a Rose Weekend during the first full weekend in March, just when its potted-up roses have leafed out and are starting to bloom. They open early that Saturday morning with special presentations, speakers and knowledgeable sales people on hand to answer questions.



Peterson Nursery in Lakeland, Florida, has a Rose Day each spring to unveil its selection of roses for the selling season. According to Karen Peterson-Norris, co-owner, about 1,000 3-gal. plants were available at the nursery for this year's Rose Day and the entire stock sold out in 45 days. One reason: the nursery sends teaser emails out to customers to let them know how the rose crop is doing. The nursery even makes phone calls to those customers who don't have email addresses (or don't check their emails very often).

*Pictured: Customers stop for a demonstration at North Haven Gardens during Rose Weekend.*

### 4. Get Plants off the Ground

"Lady shoppers do not like to pick up roses from the ground," says Patti Small, garden center manager at Plymouth Nursery in Plymouth, Michigan. "There's no way to pick up a rose bush from the floor and not get scratched." She displays potted rose bushes on risers so customers can easily transfer them to their carts without coming in contact with any thorns.

### 5. Educate Your Customers

North Haven Gardens has an eight-page instructional rose care brochure that's available on the company's website and handed out in advance of its Rose Weekend. "We actively partner with local rose societies, rose enthusiasts and local rose gardens to cross-promote and build a sense of community," says Mickie Chenault, nursery buyer. "We also have two staff members who are the go-to people on rose growing, rose varieties and basic care."

Peterson Nursery has handouts on topics, including "How to Plant Roses," "How to Prune Roses" and "Yearly Maintenance Schedule for Roses."



### 6. Plant a Display Garden

Creating a beautiful display garden filled with colorful flowers is guaranteed to increase sales of rose bushes and other flowering plants. Also, plant a bed of new rose varieties, then increase the quantities of those varieties when plant orders are placed in subsequent years. Customers in search of a yellow rose, for example, will point to the yellow roses in the display garden and say, "I want three of those."

*Pictured: New varieties, like Tropical Lightning from Weeks Roses, will stop customers in their tracks in a display garden.*

## **7. Keep Plants Looking Great**

When potting bareroot plants, use high-quality potting soil. Trim the roots and top growth to ensure the plants get off to a good start. Spray the plants weekly as needed with fungicides and insecticides. Fertilize monthly. Water daily as needed. Keep the plants groomed and the flowers deadheaded. Not only do healthy plants sell, but they sell at higher price points. Premium plants grown by quality-conscious garden centers should demand premium prices.

## **8. Offer a Quantity Discount**

If plants are properly priced to reflect their health, appearance and overall quality, then offering a quantity discount isn't a shock to the bottom line. When a customer falls in love with a particular variety of rose, suggest a grouping of three plants to create a more dramatic and beautiful look in the garden. Train employees to suggest multiples of plants at a 10% discount.

## **9. Promote Roses as Gifts**

Many garden centers in colder climates can easily recommend rose bushes as Mother's Day gifts because that's the natural peak selling time for plants in their area. But every garden center can merchandise a rose bush as a gift item. One idea used by some garden centers is suggesting a potted rose as a house-warming gift. Potting a rose bush in a decorative container makes it an instant gift—one that can command a higher price point.

## **10. Offer to Order Plants—For Next Year**

Wingard's Market stocks about 600 rose plants at the start of its spring selling season. But as the season progresses, the most popular varieties of roses sell out. "Sometimes customers come in asking for specific rose varieties by name," David says. When that happens, the staff offers to place an order for that specific variety—for next year. Not only does this make the customer happy with the store's customer service, but it pre-sells the plants a year in advance. **GP**

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