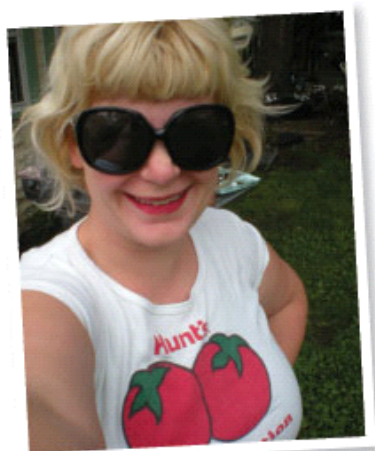


Columns

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We Will Sell No Whine Before Its Time

Amanda Thomsen



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Any day now, if it hasn't happened already: "Excuse me, where are your mums?"

Holy violas, WHY do customers want mums now? It's 98 degrees, the days are long, the backyard tomatoes are aplenty, autumn is an eon away (please, I don't even want to talk about autumn). Summer annuals are still enjoying their well-deserved crescendo. What's the rush? What's so great about mums anyways?

Mums bloom for a few weeks, tops, and of course we're already selling them in full bloom. So customers get to experience a fortnight of color, FOR ALL THIS? Mums also last as long as a sneeze in high temps.

Customers need to be TOLD this stuff. When asked, I don't tell them to install mums after Labor Day, I tell them to wait until the temperature is in the 50s during the day. This sets mum planting back to, uh, November here lately. Also, perennial mums, planted in spring, bloom sooooo much longer than the jokers we sell in the fall. We can do better. We can.

This year, I experienced the flip side of this in the spring: it was an awfully cold and wet spring here in Chicago—too cold for anything but pansies and even they suffered and took forever to get growing again. Nevertheless, customers whined about wanting their flats of red salvia or else there was going to be Hellebore to pay.

If a person wants to purchase a swimsuit at Target in November, they're out of luck. If you want fresh, local strawberries in April, no-can-do. You can't buy Valentines in July. Or a Christmas tree in June (well, I guess you can if you get a little inventive). If you need charcoal briquettes in January, that's a struggle. If you want to purchase a window air-conditioning unit in December, you have to turn to the Internet. So why do garden centers cave when customers demand bougainvillea in April?

If we don't give people what they want, when they want it, will they come back when the time is right? Or will they just find someone that will sell it to them when they want it, whether or not it's the right thing to do? Is it our job to educate and realign customers, and how can we do that? If they buy that flat of portulaca in March and it

dies, will they think you're a lousy place to buy flowers from and never think to blame their own ignorance?

I know the big box stores will start selling mums before you're finished reading this column. They answer to no one, so I get why they do it, but us garden center folk have a duty to do the right thing.

Maybe I have this all wrong and we have a commitment to give the customer what they want and give them our well-wishes (and side eye) that those impatiens will look great on that one 70-degree Saturday in March.

In my mind, disappointing customers is the best-case scenario in these instances. Let them know you care about their gardens and how they spend their money by letting them know WHY you don't have flats of begonias in March. Let them know they can count on you for reliable planting advice. Have these conversations when they ask and have fun with signage for those who don't ask. I'd go so far as to have an empty bench with "Here is where the mums will go when it's the right time to sell mums. So until then, simmer down. (And might I suggest you take home some reduced-price summer annuals to freshen your pots?)" **GP**

You can find Amanda Thomsen's funky, punky blog planted at KissMyAster.co and you can follow her on Facebook, Twitter AND Instagram @KissMyAster.