

Features

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5 Tips for Courting Newbie Gardeners

Valerie Nalls

We spend a lot of time talking about box stores snagging our business and how to combat price competition with workshops, superior quality, customer service and product training, but we don't spend a lot of time talking about how to compete for the attention of beginning gardeners.

Box stores have a clear advantage on converting and maintaining the business relationship with a beginning gardener. They sell goods in other categories, so the opportunity is there for an impulse garden purchase, like an inexpensive pretty houseplant that caught someone's eye or a fresh tray of fragrant basil. What the box stores don't have is your savvy, specialized mind and the nimbleness of a small business. Here are some steps you can take to make your garden center more approachable and inviting for a beginning gardener.



Pictured: Simple educational signs make new gardeners more confident in their purchases.

A Fresh Look

For starters, you need to look at your merchandise assortment from the eyes of a beginner. Someone new to the hobby doesn't know, nor care, about the subtle differences between eight types of *ilex*. Garden centers will naturally have a more robust selection than that of a box store, which can feel very overwhelming to a beginner. They just want a shrub that will be evergreen, easy to maintain and stays under 6-ft. tall.

Tip #1: Consider a small merchandising area where you can have secondary displays of your top choices for beginners and label the area accordingly. Ensure that this display has only a few options so they aren't overwhelmed—beginners like being guided by experts and you are the expert.

Be Kind

It's important to train your sales team on how to nurture a beginner. Garden center staff can be intimidating to a beginner. No one wants to ask a stupid question, and when you don't know what you're doing, you think all your questions are stupid. If a beginner feels like they don't belong, they'll be quick to go back to a box store where everyone is a beginner, no one is an expert and they can be anonymous.

Tip #2: Make sure your sales team conveys warmth and welcoming to a beginner—to all customers really—by

smiling, maintaining eye contact and not making assumptions about knowledge level. An easy response to a how-to question is, “I’m going to explain this in a very basic sense, since I assume everyone is a beginner. Forgive me if my explanation is too basic.” This will give a beginner a sense of relief and an intermediate gardener will either like the reinforcement of their existing knowledge, or like the ego stroke of realizing they’re no longer a beginner.

Tip #3: Stop using terminology that others might not understand, like 1-gallon, evergreen and perennial, unless you include the definition in your conversation. “Oh, you could use a perennial there; they come back every year.” You want to avoid any situations where your beginner might feel like they don’t belong. Another great tactic for your sales team is to get really familiar with the plants you deem “beginner friendly,” and whenever possible, recommend those particular plants from the beginner-friendly display space. This will give another layer of encouragement that they’re making the right choice and that they don’t have to be an advanced gardener to succeed with these choices.

Using Your Words

Create signage that supports beginners. Just like we won’t use “perennial” in a sentence without the definition, nor should we label a department with a word that beginners won’t understand without using the definition. Consider labeling products with their benefits more so than their features, as this translates better to a beginner.

Tip #4: Instead of “Compacta Holly, \$34.99, to 6 ft.” consider “Compacta Holly, easy foundation planting, trim in Spring and Fall, \$34.99.” We mentioned earlier to consider a beginner-friendly display area—make sure there are signs with very basic wording and clear instructions for maintenance. A way to test if your signs are easy for someone just starting out to understand, get one of your newer cashiers, or a neighbor or family member to read them for you and see if they can understand them.

Support Groups

The key is to attract the beginners to you in the first place. Ways to do this are social media ads, community events, postcards, roadside signage and hosting events at your shop that draws from your community as a whole. You have to constantly be exposing your company to new local folks and with a message that shows your new mission of supporting beginner gardeners. It’s not just young people that are beginners.

Tip #5: Consider hosting a Brown Thumb event where you invite self-proclaimed Brown Thumb community members. Form a relationship with a local retirement community to teach container gardening for beginners. Potential beginner gardeners aren’t just those that age-in to the hobby.

So this winter, while you’re planning for the next busy year, give yourself a beginner gardener audit. Do your sales staff explain things in advanced gardener terms? Do your displays overwhelm? Probably with just a few changes, your garden center can be a haven for your local beginner gardeners! **GP**

Valerie Nalls is vice president of Nalls Produce, a garden and produce retailer in Alexandria, Virginia, and the creator of Botanical University.

Valerie’s Side Project

Valerie Nalls is launching Botanical University, an online course designed to turn brown thumbs green, in the spring of 2018. It’s an easy-to-follow online academy that teaches beginner gardeners all the basics they need to have the knowledge and confidence to start working in the dirt. If you’re interested in learning more, you can email her at valerie@nallsproduce.com.