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Guys in the Garden Center

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For years—as long as I’ve been in this industry and that’s 15 years—we’ve focused heavily on the affluent female aged 45 to 65, as that was the conventional wisdom of who shopped independent garden centers.

Recently, however, we’ve started to see somewhat of a shift in the demographics of shoppers and it’s something worth noting. Based on recent survey data from the National Gardening Association and anecdotal information from retail garden centers, we’re starting to see more men spending in the garden center. Just how much of a shift is still up for debate.

The NGA National Gardening Survey shows interest in lawn and garden surging somewhat among men, particularly younger men. According to the survey, household members reporting spending the most on their lawns and gardens in 2017 include male respondents (61% of total reported household sales), married households (70%), college graduates (47%), and households earning \$100,000 or more (56%).

Which brings me to my next question: are we focused a little too heavily on marketing and catering to women?

Takeaway #1: Enthusiasm for lawn and garden is growing among men, particularly younger men.

In the Words of Retailers

I reached out to several retailers in the U.S. and Canada for this story, and only one said they hadn’t noticed a change in customer demographic. Others didn’t have solid data, just anecdotal evidence of noticing more men in recent years. One of those retailers is Pam Donzelli from Gale’s Westlake Garden Center on the west side of Cleveland.

“In the past few years, I have noticed a definite increase in male shoppers without their significant other,” Pam says. “It has always been normal for guys to come in by themselves and purchase nursery plants and lawn & garden products [like] grass seed, lawn fertilizer, shrubs, etc. But we have noticed an increase in male ‘browsers,’ something that is quite new and different.

“These guys are browsing the store in general and they love houseplants and gardening projects! Many come in with a plan that they researched online and then ask us for help putting it all together with the products.”

She adds they’re buying all types of plants, including houseplants, as well as pottery, garden ornaments, patio, beer and wine, and seasonal merchandise.

Kristen Busse at Greengate Garden Centres in Calgary, Canada, says while they often see men come in because they’re a STIHL power tools authorized dealer and repair center, they’re starting to see more men shopping the

greenhouse. And it's men of all ages, though younger men tend to shop with others while older men tend to shop alone. She sees more interest from them in succulents and tropical plants.

And Kris Shepard at Caan Floral & Greenhouses in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, says he's seen a slight increase in male traffic as well. "Most are seeking vegetables, and in particular tomatoes and hot peppers, such as ghost peppers."

He's not the only one who noted that, too. Patti White at Greens Produce & Plants in Arlington, Texas, says more men are shopping her store. "They love growing the hottest pepper they can find. I also see them accompanying wives or girlfriends, instead of girls shopping in pairs or as a group of women," she says.

Takeaway #2: Some retailers are seeing increased interest from male shoppers in the following categories: houseplants, edibles (in particular hot peppers), beer & wine, and succulents.

Food for Thought

One trend bringing men into the garden center is the continued "foodie" movement that's prompting more people—men and women—to grow their own food and frequent farmers markets and farm-to-table restaurants.

For more insight on this, I turned to a longtime friend outside the industry, Matt Craggs (he works in the music business), who's a foodie and has planted a larger-than-average garden for years. It turns out, Matt's father planted a small vegetable, herb and berry garden when he was a kid, so when he bought a house it was a natural addition to the backyard. He's grown just about everything, from 15 kinds of lettuce, 18 types of tomatoes and 15 varieties of peppers each year.

"I've pretty much grown anything you can think of when it comes to vegetable gardens, along with a variety of berry bushes. However, I mainly focus on tomato, pepper, lettuce/greens and herbs. Those seem to be the easiest to grow and can combat a variety of temperatures in Northeast Ohio," he says. "I love growing beets, garlic, squash, kale, kohlrabi, parsnips and Brussels sprouts as well. I love fresh salads, so I mix all of my lettuce with the fresh herbs (basil, cilantro, parsley, mint, chive, rosemary, thyme and dill) to give different tastes."

He mostly shops a small, local greenhouse for his veggie and herb starts, as well as the local Ace Hardware for supplies. I asked him what he gets out of his gardening efforts and he listed three rewards: peace/exercise, enjoyment/fulfillment and friendship/sharing.

Takeaway #3: We can help foodies with their pursuits by offering more events and products surrounding cooking in general, as well as participating in farmers markets.

From House to Home

Another trend driving engagement, as we saw above, is the love of all things houseplants and succulents. Instagram has helped to drive that trend, making it even more accessible to the masses, including men of all ages.

The owners of STUMP, Emily and Brian Kellett, see young men coming in looking for rare and unique varieties that they see on Instagram. It helps, too, that their locations—two in Columbus and one in Philadelphia—are more unisex in design. "Our shops are super gender neutral, which helps the guys feel more comfortable," Brian explains.

Takeaway #4: Stores that are designed to be trendy and unisex can welcome people of all genders and ages.

A Few More Perspectives

To get another idea of where else men were shopping, I looked at another industry that trades in live goods: the

grocery segment. There's another segment where the conventional wisdom has been women do most of the shopping, right? Well, that's been turned on its head in recent years according to recent studies in that market, including one from VideoMining in 2017 called "Grocery Shopper Impact MegaStudy." In that report, VideoMining found men shop for groceries just as often as women do. Now, men spent slightly less per shopping trip, with women spending \$2.73 more. Men also were more likely to shop online and at club and convenience stores than women, according to the report.

"Men are less price sensitive on average than women shoppers, so grocers may find there are opportunities to sell more expensive items to this group," notes a breakdown of the report on Food Dive. The breakdown also showed that both shoppers took smaller trips to the store more frequently.

Takeaway #5: Men are taking over more of the weekly grocery shopping activities and tend to be less price sensitive than women.

More Breakdowns

The online shopping aspect also caught my attention, so I talked to Sid Raisch, president of Bower & Branch, one of the larger online retailers in our industry. He pulled the last 250 transactions made on the Bower & Branch website, and 38% were made by men.

Then I put the question out for retailers—can we get a breakdown of male to female purchases for your last 100 transactions? I received yes emails from three retailers, totaling 300 transactions. Of those, 34% were made by men. At least two of the retailers were surprised by the number.

Proven Winners also shared some of their statistics with me, too, based on the surveys they've done with more than 170,000 visitors to their website and with those who receive the Gardener's Idea Book. For those surveys, women still outweigh men pretty heavily. However, they were able to break down the answers by gender to find out what men thought about topics like buying plants online, gardening challenges and branding.

Of the nearly 3,500 answers, slightly more than half said they would buy plants online, while 44% said they look for certain brands when buying. That's rather different from women, who were not as likely to buy online (almost 59% answered no to that question) and 48% said they look for certain brands. The stats for men also represent a shift in thinking since 2015, when the percentages were lower for both looking for brands and buying online. **GP**

Takeaway #6: Men are not averse to shopping online and they're starting to become more brand-aware.

The NGA Study

Want to see exactly how the numbers break down in the latest NGA National Gardening Study? Visit www.gardenresearch.com to buy the study and find out who's buying what.