

2/1/2019

Should You Offer Seasonal Combo Switch-Outs?

Ellen C. Wells

Long gone are the days when homeowners focused predominately on the annual color in their landscape beds. Pops of colors from combination containers on porches and patios have become the consumer go-to option. And for good reason: Container combos are easy to install, save time and effort, and—maybe the best reason for the horticulture industry—they can be switched out seasonally. After all, switching out a higher-priced product routinely through the year means more sales for us.

Offering seasonal combination container switch-outs is a no-brainer. They have become the gardening norm for both large homes and smaller condos, plus there is a giant demand from commercial clients such as restaurants. The question for the industry—and for your particular garden center—is this: Which of three container switch-out options do you offer?

Replacement Pots at Retail

The idea of having combination containers in fiber or “slipper” pots for customers to purchase in-store on a seasonal basis is a good one. When their once-pretty spring combo container is looking long in the tooth come end of June, they’ll ditch the one they have, pop into your shop, pick up another combo, and slip it into their now-empty base pot at home. Easy peasy.

This alone is a big step forward, according to Jim Broccolo, co-owner of Gemini Designs in the Chicago area and a former Young Retailer Award winner. “Years ago the sticker price [for combo pots] used to scare everyone off,” Jim related from his previous experience working at a garden center. “It was the whole ‘I can do this!’ Martha Stewart thing. Now everyone thinks, ‘Well, I’m going to spend about that much to do it myself anyway so for \$20 extra let’s try a replacement.’ And then they find how easy it is in the end.”

These seasonal switch-out pots are one of the things that successful garden centers are doing, according to Jim. “In the mix you have to have the unique big pots that are showy and interesting and shows what you can do,” Jim says. But then having the standard liner where you buy one each season, I think that’s huge for the garden center. Where the practice falters at retail is in determining which size replacement pots to offer. Jim said garden centers can drive themselves crazy with the number of sizes they think they need, but really there are just two or three must-have sizes.

Seasonal Subscriptions

Christina Salwitz, owner of The Personal Garden Coach and consultant for The Garden Center Group, travels

nationwide to consult with clients on all things containers. From her first-hand experience, she finds that there are not as many garden centers offering seasonal switch-outs as she'd like to see. "I find it's a lack of confidence about jumping in and doing it and finding out what their particular audience prefers," Christina notes. "No matter what you think you're doing, you're ultimately in the fashion business. It's so subjective, depending on your customer base." With the thousands of plants on our palette, how on Earth are we supposed to know what combos our clients are going to prefer?"

In addition to having choice fatigue around what to include in the pre-made pots, Christina says the other obstacle to replacement pots is pinpointing which size pots to use, since the clients all have a vast array of sizes on their porches and patios. That's why Christina is a big advocate of offering seasonal combinations as a subscription service. The ideal subscription service would have members choosing their base pots or containers from the garden center's limited size offerings, and then coming in seasonally for their replacement slipper pot. This way, the garden center will know how many slipper pots to make and in which sizes. "As long as you know it fits correctly, you're game," Christina says.

She also believes more emphasis should be placed on selling that initial base container. "I would rather sell someone a \$200 container and know I have this person on the hook to be coming back to me season after season, year after year, to do this pot because they've invested in this pot." Essentially, sell them an amazing pot and you will keep eventually sell them more plants over time.

Seen from another angle, Christina says that subscription services are a better deal for the garden center. "It's like joining a gym. Half of [the subscribers] never follow through but you already have their money."

Customer Container On- and Off-Site

Heather Wheatley, assistant store manager for Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, Maryland, says that the sizing issue was what precipitated their company's move toward creating custom containers for their clients. "We are very near D.C., Baltimore and Annapolis, and it would seem that those [clients] would have the typical two porch urns, but that's not necessarily the case," Heather explained. "They have some really innovative planters and planting ideas, and in order to facilitate their success we don't cookie cutter much of anything."

Most of Homestead's container customers bring in their containers. "If they are a new client, we talk about how they're going to use it, where they're going to place it and for how long they need it if they're going to switch out every few weeks," Heather explained. In addition to the custom creations, they also offer a number of recipes from which customers can choose, and the Homestead team does the potting.

Heather says that these customer container services are also offered on-site, too, as part of their Landscape Services offerings. "Adding a color package [to garden maintenance services] is a great idea," Heather says. "You're already in their yard, so you might as well do their containers."

Jim Broccolo's business is all about off-site container switch-outs. For Gemini Designs to stand out from the competition, "I try to go as unconventional as possible to find items that aren't in the normal mix," he says, whether it's items from small craft stores or realistic-as-possible faux botanicals that allow shoulder-season container combos to survive temperature fluctuations. "Clients are all so excited to get stuff out there, but then it's like, 'Oh no, it's still freezing.'"

Follow-up is key, whether it's to add a little slow-release fertilizer or to gather information on what works and what doesn't. As for frequency, Heather says it's dependent on what the client wants. "Eight weeks is reasonable," she says. "You get your nails done every six weeks, right?" **GP**



Pictured: Containers switched out on a seasonal basis provide that easy pop of color clients desire. These are examples from Jim Broccolo's Gemini Designs.