

Cover Story

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Starting New Traditions for the Holidays

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Let's take a look at some of the more lucrative holiday offerings and how you can provide them in a pandemic.

It's late summer, and that means the fall and winter holidays are on deck. This year, of course, will look a lot different and we have a multitude of stories in this issue to help you with various aspects of that (events, curbside pickup specifics and even kits you can assemble for holiday gifts).

Now, let's talk a little more about the most lucrative aspects of the winter holidays and how you can capitalize on them during a pandemic (of course, every aspect of life must be framed now in how to do it pandemic-style).

Making the Most of Live Goods

One segment that didn't make it into our category growth series by Digital Editor Bill Calkins and The Garden Center Group's Steve Bailey was a short item about the Christmas holidays (purely because of space reasons). Now seems like a great time to revisit that. Steve calls the holiday season a "microclimate." Bill writes that return on investment per dollar of live goods products like plants, live greens and trees can be as high as \$30, which is well into profitability. However, holiday décor and ornaments often don't all sell, resulting in bad inventory.

"Customers expect you to decorate," Steve acknowledges. "But don't decorate with inventory."

Keep purchasing, but only to the level you sell, he advises. Carrying over boxes of Christmas inventory from year to year is like paying 30%-plus on a credit card.

So what about those live plants? Let's talk about some poinsettia trends first. Of course, poinsettias are the quintessential holiday plant, but everybody sells 'em, including the box stores at massive discounts. IGCs can set themselves apart with decorative pots, larger sizing and top-notch quality (priced to match, of course).



Last winter, *GrowerTalks* Managing Editor Jennifer Zurko visited the N.G. Heimos Poinsettia Trials outside of St. Louis, held every November to showcase new poinsettia breeding. She saw a couple of trends formulating, including newer, whiter whites that lend themselves to painting and glittering (which is still a niche market). Both Selecta and Syngenta have partnered with an Italian breeder called Lazzeri to bring new white poinsettias to the market. Syngenta is also offering all of the reds in the Lazzeri line.

Pictured: Christmas Mouse poinsettia from Selecta

features rounded leaves, a first for the breeder.

Jen also noted that non-traditional leaf shapes are becoming more popular. Breeders favored the oak leaf (one breeder told Jen they're trying to shift to call this a holly-shaped leaf) look. Selecta also introduced a poinsettia called Christmas Mouse, the first round-leaf poinsettia in their lineup.

These are all options retailers can take advantage of to promote new, unique varieties that others may not have. Under its holiday offerings, N.G. Heimos also offers the traditional Christmas cactus, amaryllis, paper whites and rosemary topiaries—other options to provide festive live plants.

Winter Greenery That Lasts

Along with plants, there's the greenery that helps transform homes into winter wonderlands and pure Christmas joy. I talked to Shannon Kuhrt at M&M Wintergreens in Parma, Ohio, to get her thoughts on how retailers can provide these products this year.

"Consumers are jazzed about their yard," she says. "I'm very excited, encouraged and optimistic about the winter holidays; I think consumers are going to take that energy and run into the fall, but the garden centers have to lead them."

What she means by leading them is to make it easy to buy those live decorations for the holidays, including offering kits and easy-to-understand products online, and provide curbside pickup or delivery and setup (more on setup in a bit). To that end, the company introduced a new Winter Shoppe option, where retailers who buy from M&M Wintergreen can link to an online and mobile-friendly store where end consumers can purchase live greens July through December and pick up in store or opt for delivery.

Shannon notes that activities like live video walk-throughs of the garden center can go a long way to helping customers get excited about decorating. Make sure to describe the scents, too, that are so much a part of the holidays to grab all senses.

On the kit side, M&M Wintergreens has four porch pot kits (two more were introduced at Cultivate'20 Virtual this year) that can be easily made into pots by employees for sale in the garden center or retailers can sell the kit for customers to put together themselves. Add-ons like pots, bows, picks, ornaments and other decorations increase the purchase price (and get that ornament and décor stock out the door faster).

She adds retailers can create bundles that would change out the porch pots to keep them going from November (a harvest pot) through the winter holidays, New Year's Eve (black velvet and silver décor) into January (cardinals and white branches), and even through part of February (red for Valentine's Day). If retailers created these bundles early they could even offer a pre-paid subscription service starting in the fall that customers could pick up monthly or have

delivered.

Those porch pot kits, too, can be transformed into hanging baskets, which would be an easy way to create another décor item for the house.

“By cutting a little off the noble fir it can be converted to a hanging basket. The birds like it and it creates winter interest,” she says. “I don’t see a lot of the hanging baskets, so I think that’s an opportunity for additional sales.”



M&M Wintergreens also introduced its American Wreath this year, hoping to inspire Americans to come together. For every wreath they sell, they’ll donate a dollar to a charity that they’re going to choose based on the results of a Facebook poll between four causes local to Cleveland.

It’s those kinds of connections that will help create those new traditions that people are craving, too. While not all winter activities can go virtual—things like porch pot workshops certainly can by having customers pick up their kits before a Facebook Live or Zoom workshop.

“We have to keep that energy going,” Shannon adds.

“Start a new family tradition. Don’t focus on what they’re missing out on with COVID—focus on what they can create with a new tradition.”

Pictured: According to M&M Wintergreens, the American Wreath is designed to symbolize the fight against coronavirus, featuring the strong base of Noble Fir, sprigs of Manzanita spread out around the wreath to represent social distancing, and a ring of faux berries and cones in the center that are touching to represent unity in fighting the virus.

Do it for Them

There’s another aspect to the holidays and that’s stress. Stress on top of an already stressful situation may make customers retreat from anything that’s going to make it worse. In those instances, customers may need some extra help.

I reached out to Bob Gasper, founder of Gasper Landscapes in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to get more details on how his company offers set up and tear down for the holidays.

His business has been offering decorating services to their customers for the last 15 years, more as an answer to requests for help than anything. In the last couple of years, they formalized the service and began advertising it for high-end landscape customers.

His advice is to price for time and material service—not offer a one-time, set price. Every scenario is different and the needs change based on the customer.

“Our decorating service snowballed from regular customers who wanted us to do it,” he notes. “We had to get ourselves organized to make sure we had regular materials and pricing, that we’re all on the same page.”



His company has a 28-page catalog that's available by request for holiday decorating services, which includes indoor and outdoor decorating setup for fresh-cut or artificial trees, LED lights, ornaments, swags, sprays, poinsettias, wreaths, garlands, lanterns, battery-operated candles, pots, urns, planters and more. The catalog has detailed pricing for the products, as well as labor rates (\$62/hour per person), collections that customers can choose from for a color-coordinated look, and even tear-down and packing-away services.

They've been doing lots of video chats and conferencing to provide quotes, and he expects that will continue with holiday services, as well. So far they haven't had issues with customers reducing requests because of the pandemic, he says. In fact, the company expects to be up over last year if the rest of the year tracks with last year.

And while Gasper Landscape is doing far more regular landscape business than holiday décor, it does offer them an opportunity to stay connected to their core customers and offer them continued services to keep in front of them throughout the year.

"That is why we do Christmas," Bob adds. "Once we have a customer and they're happy with us, they want to come to us for everything." **GP**

Pictured: An example of a home decorated by Gasper Landscape for the holidays.