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We Were All New Once

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I remember the first time I visited an independent garden center as an adult, spending my own hard-earned cash. I was in my early 20s, working as a newspaper reporter in Fremont, Ohio, and watched my first-floor neighbors (Dick and Alma) plant up their small 3-ft. by 5-ft. apartment flower bed. Every year they lovingly tended to their explosion of red geraniums in the bed and in hanging baskets.

"Where did you get those?" I asked Alma. Bench's, she replied. So the next available weekend day I made the 20-minute trek to Bench's Greenhouse & Nursery in Elmore, only to be overwhelmed with color and choices. I remember buying some celosia, but I don't recall what else I planted. My little bed didn't do as well as Dick and Alma's because, well, gardening wasn't my main focus at the time.

But it planted the seed in my mind that the best place to get quality plants was an independent and that remains true to this day. Every year I've expanded my plant purchases, knowledge and skills, thanks to the local independents who offer that know-how freely.

As for Bench's? Twenty-some years later they're still not only around, but are doing a pretty solid job of offering customers a social media presence that combines excitement for the coming spring with education about how they grow their plants. On Facebook, customers watch for nuggets of information, like how much soil Bench's need to plant up all their offerings every year, which type of media they choose, what water mats look like and what type of automatic seeder they invested in. These tidbits not only keep customers interested, but they build the value of their product. There's a lot that goes into growing that 4.5-in. geranium (all 10,000 of them!). The more customers understand the process, the more they respect the grower.

Our industry is in a unique position this spring. There's evidence that 2020 finished strong in many areas of the country and 2021 is starting even stronger. Seed packet sales are up dramatically in some places and there are reports that seed producers are working feverishly to keep up with demand. We also saw statistics that showed customers gravitated toward independents last year. That's why we've targeted this issue toward a couple of key areas that can help retailers build on that momentum.

I jumped into the new gardener issue with a data-driven mindset, and reached out to researchers and industry experts to find out more about what services new gardeners are looking for and how to "talk" with them. Find out what you need to know this spring.

We hit the virtual trade shows and asked for product submissions to find some cool, new stuff you can offer those new and returning customers to keep them engaged. We've got everything from new plant foods to tools, varieties and pots.

When it comes to customers shopping your stores, there are two key elements that can aid in moving customers through quickly and efficiently. One is the benching setup and the other is utilizing endcaps effectively.

One more story I'd like to call out is Amanda Thomsen's column this month on encouraging customers to plant a cuttings garden. It's one example of how garden centers can narrow down the choices for new customers and come away with a beautiful end result. It can help build the foundation and keep those customers coming back for more. **GP**