

Features

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My, How Times Have Changed

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What's different about a retail greenhouse vs. a commercial production greenhouse?

Sixty percent of today's independent garden centers (IGCs) grow their own plants and buy in; 40% strictly buy in. Greenhouses used for flower production provide an environment best for plant growth. A typical environment would be high light, high humidity and higher temperatures. Commercial production greenhouses are not retail friendly!

Pictured: Today's retail greenhouse space isn't just for plants and products anymore. That's why modular spaces are the key for event rentals, classes, demonstrations and other interactive fun activities with customers. For example, these benches at Sky Nursery in North Seattle are on wheels so they can be moved when needed.

These commercial grow houses typically have narrow aisles, leaving as much of the interior space as possible for plant production, not for customer convenience and comfort. Equipment such as noisy cooling fans, heaters and lighting systems must be efficient and provide the best growing conditions for the plants. Plant transport, order pulling and shipping are the functions that must take place in the production greenhouse and usually an attached utility operations and processing house.

When we look at the proper design and requirements for a garden center, we find that what's good for growing plants isn't necessarily very good for a retail customer shopping experience. The retail environment should be as dry and cool as possible.

Other Design & Budget Considerations

1. Lighting fixtures are very important and must provide quality light for customers to shop by, as well as look attractive—after all, they're part of the overall interior decor scheme.
2. Placement of clear or shaded roof coverings must be considered based on what's underneath. You certainly wouldn't want a glass roof over the bagged goods, gift and checkout areas. Clear coverings allow too much sunlight to enter, bleaching out the packaging of the retail hard goods inside. They let sunlight shine into the cash register's LCD screens, making it difficult to read. And that magnified sunlight makes it hot and humid for your customers.

3. Space is always at a premium, but aisles must be wide enough for two shoppers with carts to pass by each other easily. Think about your local supermarket on a busy day and how it's possible for you to shop while others are next to you.

4. Consider conditioned space—this would typically be air conditioned and/or large paddle fans for specialty areas such as gift, food, event space and checkout.

5. Heating, cooling and irrigation equipment must be out of sight and quiet. No hoses scattered all over the floors; they're unsightly, and a trip and legal hazard!

6. Operational requirements, such as moving new inventory in and out, with staging and cleaning to be done after hours if possible.

7. We've all heard how Disney World has non-retail friendly operational activities and equipment located under the streets. It's all about the details that makes the consumer retail experience as friendly as possible, with important design strategies for everyone!

8. Think about even small operational functions, such as where do you store the rakes, hoses, cleaning chemicals, vacuums, brooms and mop buckets? Write a list of standard operating (SOP) procedures and be sure all team members have a copy.

Another important issue is maintenance. Unlike commercial growers who have tools and labor available to handle repairs and maintenance, the retail operator in many cases doesn't have these assets available and must account for how they'll handle maintenance problems efficiently when they arise with minimal interruption to retail shopping.

Personal Design Considerations

This falls into multiple categories:

- Your specific needs based on prior due diligence.
- The aesthetics of the finished facility.
- Practical considerations, such as retail and support buildings(s) space, and added parking and delivery space.
- Budget for design, permits and buildout.
- Expansion area for future.
- Time path to complete.

The retail garden center must incorporate a gathering place and environment for many uses:

- Annuals, perennials and nursery
- Floral, gift, specialty service (re-potting) display and sales area
- Event space
- Rx (a separate place for fertilizers and chemicals due to odor)
- Hardware items, lawn and garden equipment
- Outdoor furniture
- Outdoor pottery and statuary

- Leisure goods, grills, spas and lighting
- Specialty and seasonal sales area for fresh and artificial Christmas trees and wreath area
- Food items, restaurant/café/bakery/edibles
- Nursery products, landscape services, aquatic offerings
- Pet sales, pet and animal food, birding accessories
- Books and magazines
- Offices, restroom facilities, customer service desk, classroom/seminar areas
- Themed event space
- Shopping cart holding area, covered if possible, to keep snow off carts when applicable
- Fixed checkout area, as well as satellite checkouts

Alternative structures are equally important. Consider using covered canopies and walkways to merchandize your bagged goods, as well as outdoor nursery and perennial materials. These structures allow your customers and products to stay dry during inclement weather and are a great place to hold plant basket inventories overhead.

Specialty event space is typically enclosed for use during cold and rainy weather with multiple doors that can almost disappear on sides and ends, so during good weather days the area becomes an open event space. Comfortable chairs and environment are very important, as is a proper design to allow for LCD projection or large monitor(s) that can be seen during bright sunny days. In design, we think of this as “convertible” space and good audio speaker systems are a must. Other design criteria may also include an outdoor kitchen for IGC staff and local talent, such as local agriculture extension agents, garden and cookbook authors and local celebrity chefs, to use for event sessions.

Doing More With Your Space

With more and more IGCs now in the event business and newcomers are entering as well, here are some of the popular specialty spaces that are event-based:

- Open space for in-person seminars and live webinars.
- These spaces typically have a lecture area used by the IGC and local experts.
- Many of these seminars theme around product(s) offered at the IGC, such as cooking demonstrations using IGC herb promotion and canning seminars. Think about adding an outdoor functional kitchen.
- Private and corporate event functions such as weddings, bar mitzvahs, birthday parties, and corporate and sales meetings. This is a fast-moving market opportunity. Most venues book early and pay hefty deposits of 25% to 50% well in advance to hold the facility. Savvy IGCs are finding add-on options are very profitable, such as horse and carriage rentals, limousines, catering, flowers, specialty furniture and photos to name a few. Many start off by contracting these add-ons to local companies and then eventually doing much of these in-house, such as furniture rentals, flowers and catering.
- Container gardening, soil and amendments, and landscape design events.

Final Considerations

Structural design considerations may be required, such as the use of beams to reduce the number of interior

columns, providing more practical space for merchandise. And if enclosed, adequate doors that meet local and ADA codes. When using multiple structures, such as several gutter-connected structures, you can place these items in areas that have different coverings, spacing needs, and cooling and heating options specific to the use.

Utility locations both inside and outside require careful planning. Be sure you have a master plan for all of your electrical and water needs. Develop a master plan for today as well as into the future. This should include future support buildings, loading and unloading areas, warehousing, drainage, and overflow parking. Work with design experts experienced in retail design, preferably in garden center design rather than commercial design. **GP**

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