

Features

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Perennial Prowess

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It's a joyous feeling watching annuals fly off the benches in May. But it takes more than a month's worth of solid sales to stay profitable. That's where perennials and shrubs come into play, and for Rolling Green Nursery in Greenland, New Hampshire, these categories are game changers.

The garden center, which started as a landscape construction company in 1978, evolved into a nursery in 1990 before abandoning the landscape model altogether to focus on the nursery business. Now, as a retail-grower, Rolling Green usually grows between

15% and 20% of the perennials it sells, and as many as 5% of its shrubs, depending on the year. The main focus, though, is on growing summer and late-summer perennials, while bringing in other plants from outside growers.

Marketing Matters

Overall, perennials make up 20% of Rolling Green's gross sales, while shrubs make up 14%. Beth Simpson, co-owner and buyer, says using shrubs and perennials to extend the season helps boost sales during otherwise slow times. Rolling Green makes sure to promote these plants as excellent, hardy options that can provide gardeners with color from spring through fall.

"We merchandise perennials up front and purchase blocks of flowering perennials for that table to make a good display, which is great for impulse shoppers," Beth says.

In addition, Rolling Green uses a "Plants For A Purpose" banner to highlight some of the benefits of various perennials, such as deer resistance and groundcover, as well as to help customers find the characteristics they're looking for (full sun, for example).

The business also makes a point of highlighting which plants attract pollinators like butterflies and hummingbirds. One of their big marketing efforts happens every June—Perennial & Pollinator Month. During this promotion, they ramp up inventory of these plants and create a large display to entice customers.

"We have a marketing person who is a great photographer and posts on social media and updates photos on our website and e-blasts," Beth adds. "Her posts drive a lot of traffic for our plants."



Rolling Green has an on-site rain garden that often inspires customers, too, and the garden center is sure to keep plenty of those plants in stock so gardeners can recreate the look at home. Late-summer perennials—such as rudbeckias, grasses and sedums—are also marketed alongside fall mums to keep sales flowing all season long.

What to Sell

Rolling Green grows large blocks of alliums, buddleias, grasses, peonies, sedums and nepetas, as well as mums, while relying on outside growers for other

varieties. Rhododendrons, azaleas, boxwoods and dwarf evergreens are some of the biggest sellers for the garden center. Other popular varieties include hydrangeas, dogwoods and lilacs, New Hampshire's state flower.

When deciding which varieties to offer, Beth keeps up on the latest plant trials by reading anything from Richard Hawke, John Friel and Alan Armitage. But her No. 1 piece of advice is to tap into growers' knowledge to learn about new and improved varieties. While the Rolling Green team didn't get to visit any growers this past year, Beth notes the importance of doing so whenever possible.

"That is the best way to see what is available, what's being grown for the following season and listen to the growers for their favorite plants," she says.

About This Series

In 2021, we will feature a different garden retailer each month from The Garden Center Group's Best Practices group. These retailers achieved 10% or more profit in the previous year (the first couple of features are from the 2019 Best Practices Group). The Garden Center Group offers Weekly Department Reviews, as well as an Annual P&L Study for those clients who wish to participate. Both are actionable reports that retailers can use to benchmark off of and grow sales in specific categories. Find out more at www.thegardencentergroup.com.

Managing Inventory

Effective inventory management is key to ensuring perennials and shrubs remain profitable. That's why Rolling Green Co-Owner Beth Simpson says walking the mats to keep track of what's selling, as well as keeping a close watch on POS reports, is essential. **GP**