

Features

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Selling Every Season

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Like most garden retailers, annuals are the bread and butter at Del's Garden Center in Spencer, Iowa. It helps that the store mails out about 5,000 Proven Winners Garden Idea Books each year. But keeping fresh inventory flowing all season long is key, too. This has been easier to do since the business stopped growing its own annuals three years ago, according to Del's President Todd Brockshus. Becoming a true retailer rather than a retail-grower has improved overall GMROI (gross margin return on inventory investment).

Pictured: Del's Garden Center has fine-tuned its porch pot classes to allow customers to add and customize to their heart's content, translating into bigger, better and more creative designs (and happy customers).

Todd says building relationships with small, nearby specialty growers has improved just-in-time inventory, as well as saved on freight costs. The well-timed inventory, along with a focus on quality and unique product mix, means shoppers are wowed every time they enter the greenhouse.

"We frequently are told by new shoppers that they have not seen these varieties or plants of this quality at other nurseries," Todd says. "Buying in fresh plants frequently is the key to good-looking plants and long-standing relationships with growers goes right along with that."

Wintertime Profits

Even when the typical garden center busy season has passed, customers still flock to Del's. Ramping up to the holidays, the store sells packages of greens and spruce tips to help customers decorate their porch pots. Todd says Del's will sell upwards of 9,000 spruce tips alone this year.

The garden center also sells colorful willow and dogwood branches, as well as naked seeded eucalyptus and variegated cedar. Glittered birch branches, pinecones, ribbon and other greens round out the selection of festive pot material.

"As soon as we experience a killing frost in this area, normally October 10, the phone begins to ring with questions about when the spruce tips and holiday greens will arrive," Todd says. By late October, the store is stocked with

everything customers need to create their holiday pots.

Demand has grown for these items, thanks to Del's make-and-take spruce tip porch pot classes.

"Our average ticket per participant is much higher than any flowerpot filling that goes on in the spring," Todd says, adding that many participants spend more than \$100 per pot during the make-and-take events.

Over the years, Del's has fine-tuned its porch pot classes to improve profitability. In the past, "cookie cutter" classes were offered, where everyone created the same design. "We found that we were limiting sales by having a set item to create," Todd says. "A few people would add extras, but not many."

The classes now allow for more creativity, with customers invited to bring in their own pots and create custom designs. Todd says many of the containers customers bring in are huge, requiring lots of spruce tips and fresh green bundles.

The designers demonstrate the basics and participants are given free rein to get creative, which often results in the purchase of more greens and add-ons. "One of our designers likes to say, 'It's not done until it's overdone,'" Todd says.

Education is the primary goal of the events, with Del's aiming to teach the basics, resulting in repeat customers every year.

The garden center also sells finished porch pots ranging from \$60 to \$300, as well as what it calls "Plain Jane" pots, which include simple greenery that customers can gussy up at home. Del's has been experimenting with offering non-traditional items for decorating containers, too, such as holiday gnomes in Buffalo plaid whose legs dangle over the pot. The possibilities are endless.

"Whenever I'm invited to speak to a group of gardeners, I always ask how many of the participants have used spruce tips in decorating porch pots," Todd says. "The market is far, far, far from maturing and there are still tremendous opportunities with holiday containers." **GP**

About This Series

In 2021, we will feature a different garden retailer each month from The Garden Center Group's Best Practices and Best of the Best groups. These retailers achieved 10% or more profit in the previous year. 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.