

11/1/2022

Forming a Habit

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You know what's amazing? Fertilizer. I'm always amazed at how good my plants look on a regular feeding schedule, particularly the ones in pots. They're strong, healthy and vibrant. I feel as though my gardening experience went to the next level once I figured out how to fertilize.

You know what a good percentage of people don't do? Fertilize. Like, at all. This can be an opportunity for education and sales if we approach it in the right way. First, it's making sure customers understand the benefits of different types of fertilizers and how to use them. Especially when it comes to new gardeners, who don't know what they don't know. This would probably need to happen before peak spring.

Then, it's positioning products in the store and getting them into the cart before they get to the register. And finally, it's getting them to apply said

fertilizer at home.

How do you do that? It's like creating any other habit, good or bad—it takes time. That old adage it takes 21 days to create a habit is a myth, though. It's more like anywhere from two months to nearly a year. In my (admittedly short) research efforts on this topic, I found a helpful explanation from MIT researchers on how to form a habit in three steps:

1. Cue: A trigger to tell the brain to go into automatic mode to prompt the behavior
2. Routine: The behavior
3. Reward: The result that helps your brain remember that the behavior is worth doing again

If we can help customers get into the habit of fertilizing their plants, then it becomes second nature. What could be the cues that trigger customers? It could be signage in the store, social media posts reminding customers to fertilize, text message reminders or targeted emails that are specific to a plant, shrub or tree that was purchased.

Another cue could be to have either photos of or live comparisons of a plant with fertilizer and without. Sometimes showing customers is easier than verbalizing it. The routine is, well, up to them. The customer has to make the application, but the reward—that's the good stuff. That's when you walk out onto your deck or patio and see that gorgeous container bursting with blooms and color.

I did this exercise with fertilizer, but it applies for soils and amendments, too. Carefully choosing the mix I needed for each application (whether it was pots, a raised-bed veggie garden or in-ground flower beds) also helped bring my garden up to a new level. These choices go hand-in-hand with the fertilizer.

To help out with more strategies, I talked to several people in the fertilizer business. Then we talk soils and amendments, which are a natural complement to the plants and fertilizers for additional success.

Speaking of plants, take a look where our editors break down the latest in potted and gift plants.

And, let's talk more about habits—specifically yours. Katie Elzer-Peters has a great tutorial on cleaning up your website to get it ready for spring. That's a yearly habit you can dive into. And Bill McCurry builds strong habits for recruitment and onboarding that you can use year after year.

Building good habits in gardening and in business creates lasting success for everyone. **GP**