

Cover Story

11/1/2022

Feeding Your Sales

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There seems to be good news and bad news related to the fertilizer category. The bad news is if people are buying it (and that's a big if), many of them are unsure how to use it properly.

The good news is that leaves lots of opportunity for education and more sales once customers are more successful. According to a recent study of gardeners, about 70% of households purchased some type of fertilizer in 2021, which was up over the previous years. That means the education you're providing IS working!

When you break it down more, though, more than a third of those purchases were for weed-and-feed fertilizers, and the rest either blended all-natural or organic, liquid or water soluble and dry or granular chemical fertilizers, as well as manures, blood-meal, bone-meal or rock powders.

On the ornamentals side, there's room for more work to get those numbers higher. Here, I'll take a look at some strategies for selling more, as well as how to get that education out to the masses. I asked about availability for 2023, so read on for that update.



Back-ups, Bundles and Brands

There are tried-and-true methods that bear repeating: cross-merchandising fertilizers with the plants they go with reinforced with signage can get the message across. If you have YouTube videos on applications and rates, slap a QR code on that sign to point customers in the right direction.

Pictured: Master Nursery Garden Centers has new packaging and a case for easy display with Bud & Bloom Plant Food.

Proven Winners has taken some of the guesswork out of the equation, too, with their new Eco+ Grande compostable pots that have plant food right in the pot.

“(It) does have plant food built into the walls of the container, so this is constantly feeding the plant, and when the container or part of it are left in the soil, that plant food is still releasing into the soil for the next season,” says Jeanine Standard, media coordinator for Proven Winners.

They also have continuous feed and water-soluble plant foods in buckets and packets, and she offers this advice to make sure gardeners are covered: “One thing we tell gardeners is to pick a day of the week and fertilize on that day. Plants are like kids—they need not only water, but the minerals that are included in their food, too.

“The time-release plant food is an ‘insurance policy’—even if you forget the water soluble a time or two, the slow release is in the system to help back you up.”

That's two sales in one and a way to let customers know they're covered.



Pat Flaherty, vice president of sales for Master Nursery Garden Centers, says some of their garden centers opt for a bundle program that can tie the Bumper Crop starter fertilizer and Monterey starter fertilizer root stimulant in with purchases of plants, Bumper Crop soil amendments or potting soil to extend a plant guarantee and, most importantly, give the customer the best chance of success.

Pictured: Proven Winners offers both the Premium Continuous Release Plant Food (pictured here) and a Premium Water Soluble Plant Food.

He adds positioning is important and Master Nursery recently introduced a new size of a 0.75 lb. container for the water-soluble Bud & Bloom Plant Food, which comes in a case that folds into a display that can sit by the register.

"Stores that are most successful dedicate a display and end cap," he notes, adding retailers can position it as their private label because Master Nursery is only sold in independent garden center member locations.

Another way to bundle is to make the fertilizer an add-on to a gift or potted plant. JR Peters helps facilitate this with smaller packets of two options for its Jack's fertilizer that can be attached to a tag in a gift plant, reminding the gift-giver and the recipient that fertilizer is an important part of keeping plants healthy.

Mason Day, director of growth at JR Peters, also notes showing customers the difference between fertilized and non-fertilized plants is a great way to hit the message home. You can do that in store with a display and online with photos or video.



Pictured: JR Peters offers two options for its Jack's fertilizer in packets as options for pairing with gift and potted plants.

Branding helps customers come back year after year for the same product and offering a brand that customers know they can trust helps to reinforce those sales, says John Harrison, vice president of marketing at Espoma.

"It's important to focus on brands consumers know, buy at the best possible acquisition price you're comfortable with and turn them," he says, noting Espoma has been a trusted brand for over 90 years (since 1929!).

"Have product on the shelf that people want—have the brands people want and don't be distracted by brands you're not comfortable with turning. If it's sitting on the shelf it's costing you money."

The Importance of Education

Part of the battle is getting the product in front of them, but the other part is knowing how and when to use it. John says the most common questions they hear are: "I have Plant X, what's the best fertilizer for it?" and an offshoot of that is "I used Product Y and I wasn't supposed to use that, how do I keep from killing it?"

"There is an anxiety out there about it," he adds. "If you feed something Holly-tone that doesn't need it, it's not fatal. But the consumer base doesn't live this, so it's all very confusing to them."

It boils down to how much to use and when to use it, he says, noting Espoma has gone to great lengths to help

educate consumers through social media posts and influencers (just look to people like Laura LeBoutillier at Garden Answer, Summer Rayne Oakes at Homestead Brooklyn and Kevin Espiritu at Epic Gardening, just to name a few), as well as extensive product information on the website (including a great primer on Fertilizer Fundamentals) and seven dedicated sales people whose job is to support independents.

“That’s what we’re trying to do is be in those spaces with good information,” John says. “It’s not a sales pitch—the video content is designed to inspire and educate at the same time. Those two things are very important.”

Proven Winners also works with Laura at Garden Answer, along with many other influencers, and has a robust website and social media presence to answer questions about fertilizer success. Jeanine says they hear a wide range of questions from end consumers about fertilizing (check out the sidebar for a rundown of those).

Education’s Not Just for Customers

What are the resources available to you and your team to kick-start more fertilizer sales? Fortunately, there are lots. Master Nursery Garden Centers has a dealer website that includes assets like photos and descriptions, videos, training manuals and even an exam that allows retailers and Master Nursery staff to train employees on products and, if they pass, receive a Master Nursery Professional Certificate.



Master Nursery also hosts regional product training meetings, and also conducts them at trade shows and distributor shows, as well as in-store events.

“You’re training associates so they see the benefit of the whole package. You’re not just selling a plant,” Pat says. “Knowledge builds confidence, which helps sales and the end consumer’s experience.”

Pictured: This image of Holly-tone is just one example of the assets available on the Espoma Dealer website for retailers to use.

Espoma has a dealer website designed for education and offering assets that make life easier for retailers. From product knowledge to buying calculators, full programs, POP and lots more, EspomaDealer.com allows retailers to get everything they need in one place.

“We have a video training series on our site for Espoma dealers,” he adds. “With the Espoma Certified Dealer Program, you can view the videos and see training materials. It’s a really good place to start for getting team members up to speed

about this category.

“If they’re comfortable with the category, they’re more likely to recommend product.”

That seven-person sales team also is able to train employees out in the field. If you carry Espoma products, you can find your sales person on that dealer site.

Looking Ahead to 2023

There aren’t new introductions happening for next spring, but availability looks to be getting more steady. Many manufacturers had difficulty with supply chain issues last year, but lead times are starting to get better. However, the folks I talked to still said if you know you need product, it’s better to get those orders in early.

“We always suggest people plan their business and order as early as possible—I think that’s always a good business practice, especially in a seasonal business,” John says. “I don’t think the industry is out of the woods yet in terms of lead times. They are coming down a bit, but they’re not where they were in 2019 and early 2020.”

If you're storing product you already purchased, Jessica DeGraaf, director of retail accounts at Proven Winners, recommends keeping fertilizers in cool, dark areas, as moisture and heat are what break down the chemical components of plant food. If you can, wrap them in a waterproof cover of some kind to keep any moisture out.

Frequently Asked Questions

Here are some of the questions they get at Proven Winners from consumers about fertilizer:

- What time of year should I feed my hydrangeas, roses and other flowering shrubs? What should I feed them with?
- Do I really need to feed my annuals every week? Why?
- Do I need both the long-acting and water-soluble fertilizer? Why do I need both?
- Should I add fertilizer to the hole when I plant my new perennials and shrubs?
- How do I fertilize the plants in my self-watering containers?
- It's been raining so much that I haven't fertilized and now my flowers look terrible. Why? **GP**