

Features

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Cool-Weather Interest

Matthew Olson



As we examine consumer trends, one thing is clear: gardening is not just a summer activity.

Spring and summer are critical for retailers, but consumers want to extend their outdoor displays into fall and winter, too. They want nature year-round, whether a festive fall container or a snowy winter display. For retailers, this means opportunities to bring in customers after the peak season.

Pictured clockwise from far left: This fall container features Supertunia Latte Petunia, Proven Accents Silver Bullet Wormwood, Dolce Wildberry Coral Bells, Angel Wings Senecio, Graceful Grasses Purple Fountain Grass and Proven Accents Silver Falls Dichondra.

• This fun fall box contains Hippo Rose Polka Dot Plant,

Lemon Coral Sedum and Graceful Grasses Purple Fountain Grass.

• Coreopsis Uptick Gold 'N Bronze with Salvia Mirage Salmon and Lavender Superblue.

Fall displays use various plant materials, including perennials. I spoke to Seth Reed, Sales and Marketing Manager at Darwin Perennials, to gain insight on promoting these versatile plants in containers. We know consumers like to change their interior décor for each season, so how do we encourage the same mindset for outdoor areas? Seth used the example of throw pillows to emphasize this point: “Customers have their Easter throw pillows, they have Valentine’s Day throw pillows, they have summer or regular everyday throw pillows.”

The containers themselves are an excellent place to start. “Everyone has a different style, and people have the colors they like, so make sure that you have a different-colored product assortment to change with the seasons and mirror how people are doing their home décor,” he suggested.

We often go to department stores and observe the seasonal themes of their products and garden centers can replicate that concept to keep the seasonal mindset outdoors, too. If you’re offering patio furniture, ensure your customers have the plant containers to go with it.

Don't Forget Perennials

Perennials are versatile plants in late-season containers, with hardiness as a critical benefit. Many annuals are susceptible to frost, which makes it harder to keep the display looking fresh. At the same time, perennials typically handle colder temps without losing the flowers or foliage, a clear benefit, especially in northern landscapes. Eventually, those perennials succumb to the cold, but can still be useful.

Seth emphasizes the ability to use these plants in different ways. Once the display fades, consumers can plant the perennials in their landscapes, allowing the plants to become long-term fixtures.

“A lot of products like to use the language of three-in-one or two-in-one to highlight many uses,” Seth said. “So you have it for now for fall, it offers winter interest for the wildlife, and it will come back the next year.”

I asked Seth to highlight unique perennials for flowers, foliage and wildlife value. Gold Crest Caryopteris is a dwarf caryopteris that features yellow foliage in summer, then dark purple blooms in late summer and fall. A small shrub to consider is lavender, which has blue-purple flowers that can last into fall, along with fragrant, fine-textured foliage.

Echinacea is one of the more common perennials for many reasons. “Echinacea has a lot of warm, fall-oriented colors, and they’re excellent for late-season pollinators and birds,” Seth said.

Coreopsis is another continuous bloomer that shines in late summer and fall, offering an array of bright colors. Butterfly bush is also known for its long bloom period and attraction to pollinators.

Foliage is crucial, especially in the fall. Heuchera gives consumers countless options for leaf color and the color often improves with cool temperatures. Brunnera stands out with silver foliage and heart-shaped leaves.

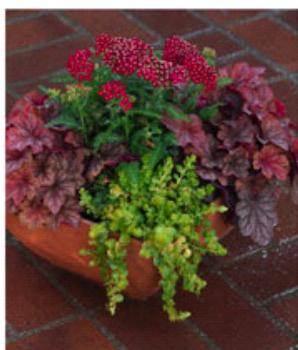
Highlight the Benefits

Winter displays are gaining traction among home gardeners, bringing a need for long-lasting materials and new ideas. Shannon Kuhrt is the Vice President of M&M Wintergreens Inc., a family business in Cleveland, Ohio, dedicated to supplying retailers with greens for the winter season. Over time she’s seen changes in the materials suitable for winter displays. One example is boxwood.

Shannon said, “Finding boxwood and sourcing it becomes a little more challenging, as blight concerns arise nationwide, so it’s been great to find other alternate products that fill that same need.” Red Huckleberry has emerged as an alternative for boxwood and holly, featuring bright red foliage in winter.

Another trend is consumers are using these products differently than in the past. They’re busy and don’t have time to decorate, making certain items more appealing. This trend is becoming evident for Shannon.

“We sell a lot more western cedar, which is much thicker and fuller,” she said. “It’s a higher price point item, but the younger generation that’s coming up is more willing to have Instagram-ready pictures of garland versus 100 feet stretched down a fence post.”



Pictured far left: Heuchera Carnival Rose Granita and Carnival Watermelon with Achillea Milly Rock Red and Lysimachia Goldilocks.

• An example of a winter-themed porch pot from M&M Wintergreens.

Consumers may feel intimidated about creating displays if they lack experience making them. To solve this dilemma, many retailers are hosting workshops to build people's confidence in creating floral displays,

often making it part of an event, like a wine night.

The environment is a major focus for today's consumers, especially younger generations. Retailers can help consumers understand the harvest process for greens and reinforce the sustainable practices used to ensure the long-term health of harvest sites. Many of the greens you see are taken from trees in the Pacific Northwest, where the trees are trimmed to retrieve the greens.

"People see all these greens and they think all these trees are just cut down for greens," Shannon said. "It's like a haircut for a tree; it's just trimming it up. It allows more sunlight and nutrients to reach the soil. Nothing is cut down."

As winter ends, consumers can help their local ecosystems by adding greens to their landscape as mulch or create a pile for wildlife.

Another way to promote winter containers is by selling unique materials. "I still see a lot of Fraser fir being used in box stores because it's a little cheaper, but it looks a little cheaper too if it's not harvested right," Shannon noted. "I think the independent garden centers can set themselves apart by carrying different things they don't see in the box store climate."

A Display for Every Season

Proven Winners has been heavily involved with container displays, as they help consumers see the potential of using annuals, perennials and even shrubs in pots. Media Coordinator Jeanine Standard is seeing a trend with consumers using a single pot for year-round interest.

"So many people want a large pot outside their door and it's helping them realize different ways you can change it throughout the season," she said.

Jeanine suggested using evergreen shrubs, like arborvitae, a four-seasons plant that people can use while adding plants around it during other seasons.

"You can make it your own. You could add little white lights and ornaments to the evergreens," she said. "That's the fun of it. In the fall, you could tuck a little scarecrow guy on a stick in the pot. We also encourage them to plant spring and summer flowers around the evergreen."

Many retailers see consumers embracing a silver/white color scheme for summer pots. These colors can easily be applied to winter containers. Materials like frosted branches, milo berries and silver branches are beautiful items to brighten any outdoor space, along with golden-colored things to add extra sparkle.

We've all been to department stores where mannequins display a clothing item to demonstrate the final look of a product. Jeanine says retailers can take the same approach with container displays.

"We've always referred to the mannequin shopping approach, and that's what garden centers could use to highlight ideas with winter containers, then have those items in that spot, making it easy for customers to access those materials," she said.

Everything in one place encourages consumers to be creative and seek new ideas for their home, not only for plants, but any seasonal décor. Fall is the perfect time to highlight various color combinations in pots, from warm and cheerful to spooky Halloween themes. Remember to take advantage of the non-plant accessories that will accent the plants and provide creative texture to the display.

Summer is only beginning, but fall and winter are right around the corner. Are you ready? **GP**

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