

# the CONSUMABLE CONSUMABLE

Vegetables and herbs have made a comeback in your retail space. What can you do to make your garden center a mecca for the consumable consumer?

By Sid Raisch

**W**e've taken them for granted all these years, but they didn't mind. Tasty, delicious, aromatic and oh so versatile, herbs and veggies are good for the mind, body, spirit and business.

Edibles bring customers back time and time again. The people who grow them come early and they come often. They are consumers of the most consumable of all consumables — food. This is more than a product category, it is the most important category available. Recognize and take advantage of it as such.

Consumables are fuel for the business enterprise, like vegetables are for the body. As long as we don't overstock, consumable inventory turns over fast and furious. Think about this. The largest retailer in the world sells mostly consumables, and the largest manufacturer of consumable consumer goods has grown with them. Those would be Walmart and Proctor & Gamble.

### Garden Lifers

Fighting cabin fever, the most enthused gardeners are into their edibles. Even before our spring season begins, they begin to dream and plan their spring garden. Actually, they never stopped gardening, having tucked garlic and other winter crops into the earth before going inside. Indoors they sprout seeds for the delicate young tender shoots. Under lights, they grow and harvest lettuce for a dinner salad. They sow seeds for transplanting outdoors when

frost dissolves from the earth. We get to know these "real gardeners" and their habits and preferences more than other customers because we see some of them every week almost year-round — if we have the feed for their need.

Why are there so few real gardeners? Where did they go? Did they leave us, or did we leave them?

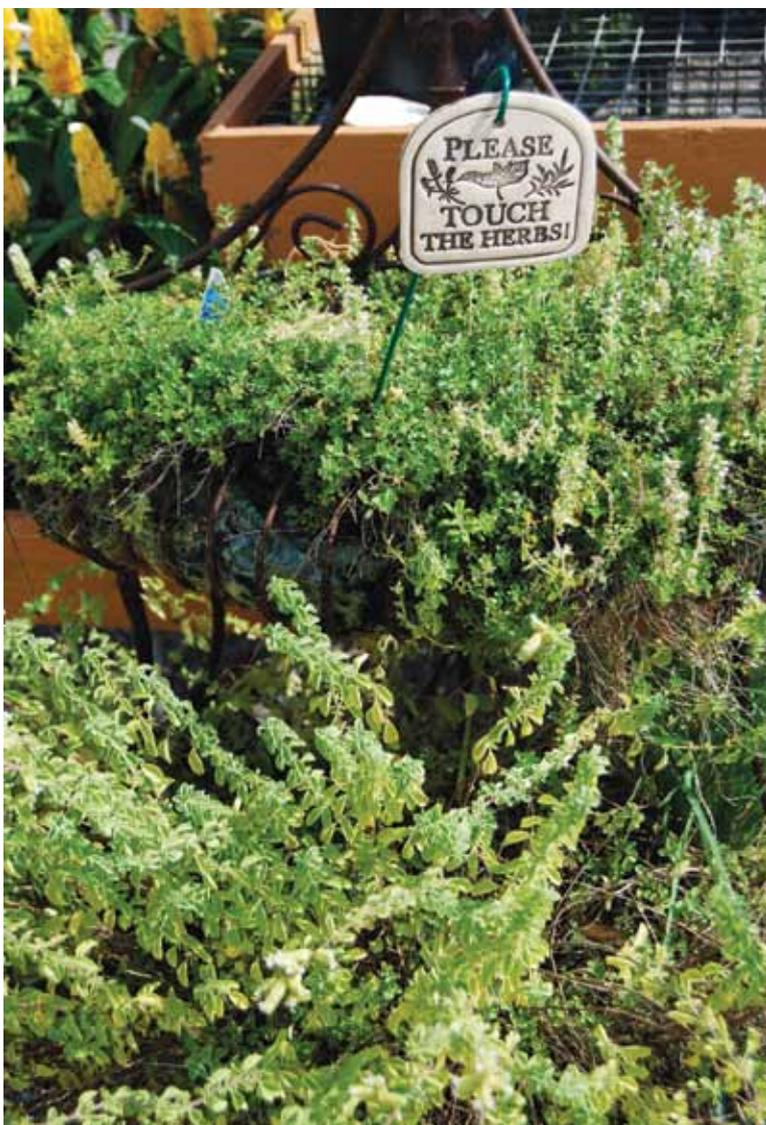
These old diehard gardeners are few and far between these days. Is it because the box stores took their huge share of the market, or because we failed to sow our own seeds of tomorrow's customers?

I'm convinced that a fixation on ornamental horticulture in the higher education system took us well away from the roots of horticulture — edibles. A majority of research and training over several decades has been focused on perennials and ornamental shrubs and trees. Expertise was developed for the new frontiers of landscape and perennial garden design leaving edibles out altogether. Skills for planning succession and companion planting of edibles was left to the shrinking and self-feeding population of the remaining diehard edible gardeners and a few gardening magazines who supported them.

Once again, we have met the enemy and he is us.

In our pursuit of all things shiny, flashy and colorful we let the color do the work of marketing and selling our product for us. The masses of our own industry literally stepped away

There aren't too many departments in the garden center where tasting the product is encouraged. Don't limit your herb and vegetable area to benches and displays. Plant an actual garden that will inspire customers, track progress and tempt a taste test.





from developing or fostering the yearn to learn and grow what we eat. The Galloping Gourmet and Julia Childs weren't enough to carry on the inspiration by themselves. Two generations were left behind.

### Edible Resurgence

Did you know that in some garden centers, real gardeners now include some of the youngest customers in a strange but welcome mix of paradoxes?

Are cable television superstars saving the day? HGTV, the Food Network, and of course, Martha Stewart Living have brought modern day superstars of the flat screen to the rescue! Is it too little too late? Or are you recognizing and riding the wave, enabling your local consumers with your own renewed and enthused interest in the edible gardening category?

Is this a question of what to do, or a question of you deciding to do it? There is little to nothing standing between making your garden center a hub of hubbub about edible gardening just as it is about flower and ornamental gardening. Standing between where you are and where you could be is the way you see this opportunity and your willingness to open your eyes, grow a vision and culture, and do what you need to do to crank your efforts up a few notches.

Frequent feeding of the desire and passion of gardening brings edible gardeners in early and often throughout the year. No one frequents a garden center more than the edible gardener and this increases transaction count. Recognize that this destination category extends the season forwards and backwards and can help pull people through the store depending on how it's placed.

### A New Playing Field

The benefits of growing gardeners of all things edible may surprise you when you think about them:

**New edible gardeners** become one of our own, whether we spark the interest or fan the flame someone else ignited. They tend to stick close and rely on us for more information as their interest, knowledge and skills grow. The base of customers solidifies so new shoppers mean growth of our customer base, not just a slowed decline.

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**Real gardeners** become disciples of gardening. They become heroes of the neighborhood and around the water cooler or coffee pot when they share the bounty of their harvest. They spread the word about what's new. They aid and enable new gardeners the way any of us take a beginner under wing and encourage them.

**Pushing the envelope** of spring, it's the real gardener who needs, and therefore buys, the most gardening supplies. They consume soil mix, fertilizer, cold weather plant protection and remedies, and they consume more of them.

Additionally, consumable gardening also lends itself to an array of marketing techniques:

1. Feeding the fever of edible gardening – Reignite your own passion or find someone who can do this for you. Cultivate a culture of foodies within your organization. Create a class of real gardeners among yourselves.
2. In-store promotion – Don't just build a display of raised planters. Plant them! Demonstration gardens must be highly visible and well maintained.
3. Share your harvest – Sharing a sampling of

fresh food prepared from your own harvest is the key whenever you have people in your store, not just when you have a class.

4. Get cooking! – This is where the benefit of the garden comes in. Why would I grow it if I don't know how to enjoy it? Keep the language simple — sans cooking jargon and horticultural mumbo jumbo. Concentrate on simplicity in preparation and bold taste from easy steps. Encourage eating from the garden and packing of a snack bag of goodies to take to school or work.

5. Slow Food vs. Fast Food – Encourage your associates and your customers to embrace the concept of Slow Food. Check out [www.slowfoodusa.com](http://www.slowfoodusa.com) to learn more about the history of the movement and how easy and practical it is to unplug from the fast food fix. Be starving for slow food and be well fed in no time.

### Take Action

So what now? You'll be tempted to let spring run its course and save a push toward edible gardening for later again. This is not a bleeding edge trend. Others have gone before you and not all of them are limping back licking wounds of having tried and failed at getting customers on-board.

Find out who has found success. Accelerate your learning by linking up with edible gardening enthusiasts. Learn what they've already learned instead of having to figure it out by yourself. That's a shortcut to edible success. **LGR**

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