

Think BIGGER About Your Edibles



To attract interested gardeners, stores should establish a separate destination for edibles, like this one for Savor Edibles & Fragrants.

By Nathan Keil

Get an inside look at a handful of garden centers who have stepped up their edibles departments with unique merchandising and in-store experiences that take the customer from buying to harvesting.

Unless you've been living under a rock for the past few years, it's clear that the state of the edibles market is exploding. And the demand for fresh, local food has further ignited this trend among consumers all over the country. Add to that the whole farm-to-table concept and you have an edibles movement that involves all major demographics — young apartment dwellers, Generations X, Y and Z, and even Boomers.

"We've easily seen double-, maybe even, triple-digit growth in the sales of our Savor Edibles & Fragrants line this past year," says Jay Cebrowski, manager at Lovell's Garden Center in Medfield, Massachusetts. "And we've seen a nice mix of young to old, singles to families participating in its rise."

The good news is the popularity of edibles isn't going away anytime soon, as industry reports indicate today's new breed of consumer (dare I say the M word?) is by far the fastest growing group of food gardeners in the U.S. — increasing nearly 70 percent since 2011.

Furthermore, these households possess much more than just a "stick it in the ground" mentality. This group wants to jump into edibles gardening with both rubber boots on — whether they admit to knowing what they're doing or not.

They look to gain as much from their gardening experience as they can. And they look for ways to involve their spouses and children in the process, while passing along the experience and fruits of their labor to their extended family, neighbors and community at large.

Today's retailers who are looking to endure changes in the market, the season, the trends and even their customer base must consider alternative rules of engagement.

When it comes to edibles, this burgeoning group of diggers clearly sees beyond the plant itself to all that it can do and add to their lives. I know, I know. You're saying, "It's just a tomato plant. How can some simple tomatoes enrich someone's life? They hit a bowlful of lettuce, and it's just a few fork jabs away from non-existence." To that, I say, "No, no, Mr. and Mrs. Garden Center Owner, that's where you might want to reconsider."

You see, your new customers actually understand the full potential of those silly tomatoes. From an afternoon planting experience they get to share with their 3-year-old daughter, to creating the very best sauce this side of Papa John's for family pizza night, to whipping up some focaccia for the local church bake sale, to the largest beefsteak tomatoes on Facebook.

Liz de Souza, garden center manager of Bartlett's Farm in Nantucket, Massachusetts, totally agrees. "For us, the social aspect of gardening is enormous. Our customers love to come in for herb and vegetable plants, then share all the fun they have in their gardens on Facebook and Instagram. It truly is about sharing their experiences with others. And that's what makes it all the more fun for us.

But where does this new group of gardeners go to enrich their edible experience? You guessed it ... their local garden centers.

Before we get too deep into this article, however, we need to recognize that the landscape of today's garden center has changed dramatically over the past few years. Gone are the days where you're able to build a successful business by merely carrying the same products and selling them the same way.

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MERCHANDISING

and even their customer base must consider alternative rules of engagement.

From an edibles standpoint, this means continuing to sell your products even after they are loaded into the back of your customer's Subaru. It means you need to think about how the product they've purchased is going to impact their life, then work hard to identify ways to further engage them and encourage their return visit.

Educating Your Staff

For the purpose of this article, let's consider the lavender plant. To begin customer engagement, how about planting lavender (among other herbs and veggies) in your own garden right there at your store?

This not only gives you and your staff a hands-on experience working with and growing this fragrant and tasty herb, but it gives your personnel the knowledge they need to become an even stronger sales team.

That's because they'll get to see first-hand how the plant reacts to different light, air temperature, water conditions and even soil composition. They'll be able to experiment with different companion plants and work with various fertilizers and pest deterrents too. All of which makes your staff more in-tune with the gardening issues your customers face day-to-day.



Customers at McDonald Garden Center create their own tiny herb garden, which extends the whole experience from store to home.



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Local chefs at McDonald Garden Centers demonstrate how customers can create fresh herb and veggie dishes quickly and easily from their own garden harvests.

“We plant raised beds every season. Almost like a small community garden,” says Tracy Monroe, manager of the Hyannis Country Garden in Hyannis, Massachusetts.

“It brings our staff closer together and gives them a better understanding of why we do what we do,” continues Monroe. “It’s the perfect way to get our employees involved in edibles gardening, while working out their sales pitch. The more educated our staff, the more informed our customers, and the better experience they’ll have in their gardens. It’s really all about customer satisfaction, I think. And if they’re satisfied, they’ll share their enthusiasm with their friends and family ... and they’ll come back to the store for more.”

Getting the Department in Shape

Now that your staff is in the know, let’s turn our attention back to your customers, where you can offer an herb-growing class to help them become more familiar with how to care for lavender. Now, I know you’re saying, “We already offer ‘Gardening for Beginners’ classes ... there’s nothing new with that.” But to that, I encourage you to please stay with me.

So, once a customer attends one of your herb clinics, they leave with a little flyer from your store describing the holistic, health and cooking benefits of herbs, along with a coupon for 15 percent off potting soil. A couple weeks later, they return to buy some of your thoughtfully merchandised containers of lavender and a bag of soil.

Much like a grocery store where all dairy products are in one specific location, it’s extremely important to have a separate area in

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True farm-to-table dinners at Bartlett's feature their own farm-grown edibles, creating a greater sense of community, while fostering stronger relationships inside and outside the store. Photo Credit: Brian Sager.

your store just to promote your edibles. That way, returning customers know exactly where to go and what to look for.

This should include all the banners and how-to tips you have available, as today's gardeners are a ravenous bunch of information gatherers. I suggest you go the extra mile and introduce edibles-specific bench tape, banners and trolley signage that capture the eye of any would-be herb and veggie lover.

Much like a grocery store where all dairy products are in one specific location, it's extremely important to have a separate area in your store just to promote your edibles. That way, returning customers know exactly where to go and what to look for.

"There's a year-round demand for herbs," says Dana Malcolm, greenhouse buyer at Kennedy's Country Gardens in Scituate, Massachusetts. "To take full advantage of

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that, we've designated a section in our store just for herbs and vegetables. And that's where we merchandise our offerings and promote our seasonal classes."

The Potential of Events

Once the lavender plant is in the ground and growing, your next opportunity to engage your customer is to invite them back to your store's Herb Fest, for example, where they can learn how to harvest and use these beautifully versatile plants — preparing your customers

in advance for the fun that awaits them in the weeks ahead.

You can even encourage them to invite friends to your event to create a more intimate and personal experience. At the fest they can learn which part of the plant to harvest, and how to use its leaves and stems.

"We've actually created a special weekend for our customers that's all about tomatoes," says Hyannis' Monroe. "Our Tomato Weekend focuses on all the different kinds of tomatoes we offer, how to grow them successfully,

what diseases may impact them and then what they can do with them after harvest. I love it when I see our customers get excited. The knowledge is very empowering for them, and they can begin to see how much fun gardening with edibles can really be."

After attending your Herb Fest, customers can now be offered an exclusive invitation to participate in a cooking class. At this event, they'll be treated to the culinary musings of a local chef known for recipes that feature fresh vegetables and herbs. (This, of course, will be your chance to finally learn how to bake that lemon-lavender pound cake that's been pinned to your Pinterest board for the last six months.)

"With my husband being a professionally trained French chef, we often cook up some wonderful dishes using Savor Edibles & Fragrants and post them to our blog," says Ashley Molion of McDonald Garden Centers in Virginia. "Savor's plant tags have growing tips on one side and recipes on the other, so my husband uses them to illustrate to customers how what they do in the dirt translates to what can happen in the kitchen ... and what can ultimately be served on the table."

If done properly, your efforts will create loyalty, as well as memories and experiences for your customers that will last well beyond them just filling a hole in the ground. And that, my friend, is what it's all about.

Molion continues, "Urban gardening is huge now too, so we show people that they don't need acres upon acres to grow something meaningful. In fact, they can be successful with a small patio or container garden. One that can produce enough herbs and vegetables to feed their family for the season ... and pass along to neighbors."

For those seeking adventure on a more adult level, you might want to create a Ladies Night. A perfect chance to invite your female customers to come and learn how to grow a cocktail garden, complete with mint samplings (perfect for mojitos, by the way) and enough spirits to lift the mood of any she-gardener.

At Adams Fairacre Farms in New York, herb-infused beverages have been a hit for several years. It first started by offering them to customers during seminars.

"Once we saw how excited customers were with our herb-infused drinks," begins farmer Sue Adams, "We decided



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to offer seminars on how to make them — from flavored waters to frozen hot chocolate infused with orange mint.”

Noting today’s trend for bartenders to use herbs in mixed drinks, Adams created a special garden industry event called “Dazed & Infused.” There, she taught guests how to make rosemary and thyme sangria for the winter and mint sangria for summer.

“We’ve had such a great time showing how people can invent delicious beverages by using a little imagination,” Adams says.

“And we’ve taught them that herb infusion doesn’t have to stop with drinks. We’ve presented ways to infuse herbs into candy and chocolate,” Adams continues. “And we carry comprehensive herb recipes and information on our website, as well as in our social media posts to help move the whole experience beyond the store and deeper into our customers’ lives.”

When it comes to demonstrating the broader impact of herbs and vegetables, McDonald Garden Center is on the same page as Adams. “To show our customers the health benefits of edibles, we’ve developed special workshops in conjunction with our local hospital network,” Molion says. “For these, we bring in the hospital’s nutritionist to talk to

Workshops like Adams Fairacre Farms’ “Dazed & Infused” session enables customers to create unique and tasty herb-infused treats.



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our customers about the healing properties of herbs. She also talks about the advantages associated with eating vegetables ... like how adding just a few to your diet could literally add years to your life. Now, that's the kind of thing that elevates the edibles we sell from mere pots on a bench to something bigger."

Taking Edibles Beyond Eating

Once the end of the harvest season is in sight, you have the opportunity to engage your customers again by inviting them to attend a craft session at your store. There, they can learn about the latest decorating trends using herbs and vegetables — drying them to make seasonal gifts like a lavender soap, body lotion, wreaths or sachets, for starters.

"What's been a real crowd pleaser for us has been our DIY series," continues Adams. "Our newer customers are very hands-on and enjoy making things themselves, so we like to show them how to create keepsakes with pressed flowers, how to make fragrant lavender bath salts and how to host their own herb and petal parties. All of these are great ways to use edibles to attract younger families and millennials into our stores ... helping them to see us as a fun and friendly destination."

And, lastly, remember that herb and veggie garden you planted at your store at the beginning of the year? Well, it's time to harvest. And that creates a wonderful occasion for you to share the bounty with your staff and families, as well as some key customers during a Harvest Night at your store. Sure, this'll be an exciting, morale booster for your staff after a long, hard year ... but you should also consider it as another way to rub elbows with your customers and talk about all the fun you had this growing season.



Edibles events speakers at Adams Fairacre Farms take customers from the vegetable and herb garden to the kitchen.

several years, inviting customers to exclusive farm-to-table dinners during harvest season, as well as throughout the year.

Their favorite local chef (Chef Neil Hudson, by the way. So look him up the next time you're in Nantucket) prepares delicious meals featuring Bartlett's own farm-grown veggies and herbs. "These events are not only a great way to highlight what you do with the veggies and herbs, but they help strengthen relationships among our customers and community. Attendees definitely enjoy them, as we typically sell out each and every event. It's a win-win-win, for sure," says de Souza.

Now, I've provided just a few examples of the myriad of things you can do with edibles to motivate your customers to come back to your store. But it's important to note that the goal you set should be much higher than just getting customers to return.

If done properly, your efforts will create loyalty, as well as memories and experiences for your customers that will last well beyond them just filling a hole in the ground. And that, my friend, is what it's all about.

Bigger thinking that engages your customers and fosters stronger relationships ... while sharing the exciting adventures of edibles gardening. And with food gardening at its highest point in years, the bigger you think, the greater the opportunity to grow more than just edibles. (Wink, wink.) **LGR**

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