

A Tale of Two Gardeners: Daring to Be Different and How to Sell It!



By Christina Salwitz

The late, great JC Raulston said, “If you’re not killing plants, you’re not stretching yourself as a gardener.” Or another way to say it from John Maxwell is, “If we’re growing we are always going to be out of our comfort zone.”

That’s sound advice for most gardeners because the best learning tool is the experience of falling in love with a plant, taking it home and figuring out how or why it died or why it continued to thrive without any experience growing it before.

I’m always telling my customers, “Don’t worry, I have no judgment about whether that plant lived or not. I’ve already made the commitment to killing most all of them before you so that you can learn from MY mistakes.”

Valerie Nalls (Nalls Produce in Alexandria, Virginia) gave this advice: “As a salesperson, I think it’s most helpful to remind them that it’s OK if something doesn’t work out! Gardening is not an exact science, and if something doesn’t work out, the worst-case scenario is not that bad! You pull it out and try something different!”

Different Types of Customers

Many gardeners fear and resist trying new things. Let’s call this person “Gardener A;” she loves the routine of the same tasks and chores done the same way every year.

She loves knowing she has a go-to list of the same plants every year that her mother bought, or that grew around the family home she was raised in and enjoy the comfort of continuity in her world.

On the flip side, you have “Gardener B” who gets bored easily and craves change. She loves to roll the dice with variety and welcome options for potential failure because the high of success is SO attractive.

These gardeners find routine poisonous to their passion for gardening. I can personally identify with that group.

More and more, I’m encountering customers who are often overly apologetic either about killing a plant they felt they should have known how to keep alive, or they have a not-so-secret yearning for a long-term plant to die so they can remove it with a clear conscience.

Except for growing food crops, plants are not a necessity of life for most casual gardeners, so the investment in time and effort is dear, not to mention the potential hit to the budget these days.

So, it’s understandably hard to get new and experienced gardeners alike to try something completely new or maybe outside of their comfort zones.

But, as it turns out, research shows they may not actually be afraid of failure at all; they are saying they are afraid to succeed!

What’s the Fear?

Gardener A loves the idea that she can set out in the morning, know exactly what she set out to purchase, get it done and check it off her list. She thrives on RELIABLE. She will do the dutiful gardening chores year in and year out faithfully without fail or complaint.

This gardener, as it turns out, DOES want to try new things, but the fear of that unknown, and potentially successful outcome, steers her away from taking that leap of faith in the garden.

What if I don’t like it? What if it dies? The myriad of “what ifs” plays a very big role in this gardener’s imagination despite our clear explanation of a new plant’s benefits.

So, we have a paradox. Not only is Gardener A NOT afraid to try new things, she is often eager, if there is a clear perception of what success actually looks like.

She must see it to believe it and only then will she embrace the stimulation of the new and different. This highlights the reason to try the challenge of new things; it almost always brings something good.

Opening our minds to a new thing or a new way of thinking is often frightening for Gardener A because it’s unfamiliar.

Unfamiliarity often rings the alarm bell: “danger — potentially unsafe.” But if you think about it, most of the things we fear don’t actually come to pass. What’s more, we’re often unable to anticipate the good things that do occur because of our trying something new.

Tiffany Stover from Froelich’s Farm and Garden in Furlong, Pennsylvania, says her favorite quote

was from Janet Kilburn Phillips: “There are no gardening mistakes, only experiments.”

“I love it because I learn from trying and doing and seeing,” Stover says. “I don’t have a formal education in horticulture, but I’ve learned so much from trying things out, more than I thought I could. Nothing beats hands-on learning. I was formerly a ‘brown thumb,’ but I taught myself through experimentation and now am surprised at how much I know.”

5 QUICK TIPS for Selling New and Exciting

1. Trying something new often requires courage, so help build that relationship.
2. Create a visual image of your customer having success and the feeling of JOY when selling.
3. Beat the boredom! This is where your super creative displays and container designs come into play.
4. Demonstrate that being fearless doesn’t necessarily mean a long-term commitment or financial loss.
5. Try it with a friend! Wouldn’t this be a great event idea?

DIRTY SECRETS

Maureen Murphy, owner of Bayview Farm and Garden on Whidbey Island, Washington, understands that her customers feel strongly about plants that support wildlife. So, she presents new options to them that appeal to this cornerstone belief: "Plants that have a strong focus on supporting wildlife and a healthy bio system are important because we take so much from nature, it's only fair that we do what we can to give back."

This is how Maureen recommends to her customers a wonderful plant that fits those priorities: "Amelanchier, aka saskatoon berry, in the tree form is a great small garden tree that is

beautiful in flower in the spring, produces copious fruit for the birds in late summer and has lovely fall color. Cedar waxwings love it and may not be seen in the garden otherwise. Also, it has historical significance as a primary and important food crop for the tribal people."

Intriguing Gardener A

Of course, some eager customers, like Gardener B will always buy the latest and greatest introduction of a new petunia, hydrangea or Japanese maple. But, Gardener A's are frequently weekend warriors who buy the same brand of

fertilizer, the same flats of spring annuals, the same porch pot combinations and hanging baskets year after year after year.

So, what's the trick to getting Gardener A to dip her toe into the "new, more floriferous, cold hardy, drought tolerant, better color, longer blooming, more disease resistant, lower maintenance, better value pool?"

Lynne Phillips, manager of Natural Art Garden Center, Strasburg, Virginia, says this with her trademark humor when a customer agrees to try something new and different: "I want to make you successful; if you have any questions or concerns, call me, email, send up smoke signals.

"I can help you solve most gardening problems but I cannot solve death. A plant will hang on for dear life for months. Most plants do not die overnight. But follow my easy instructions and you will do great!"

Tina Rovito Bemis, owner of Bemis Farms Nursery in Spencer, Massachusetts, is well known in the industry for her amazingly well-attended and uber-creative events. Here's her take on it: "Hosting container gardening workshops allows you to introduce something new to customers, along with that which they are already comfortable with."

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"New plants are like children, some are easy, some are difficult, but with the right love and care they grow up to be amazing members of the family," says Ryan Bates, nursery manager at Ted Lare Garden Center in Norwalk, Iowa.

Dustyn Nelson of Cheap Sam's Plant Bargains in Holtsville, New York, had this great idea: "We created a display garden using socket pots, so the display could easily be changed, yet looks like a planted landscape. This helps people visualize how different plants work together, including unique pieces."

Debbie Cacka Foisey, owner at Deb's Greenhouse in Morenville, Alberta, Canada, had this brilliant technological tip: "Some plants need special care; we will help you program a care reminder into your phone, so you get a reminder. When taking care of plants becomes a habit we are all more successful."

Tish Llana of Countryside Gardens in Hampton, Virginia, says "Our two hottest classes this spring at Countryside Gardens that were made up of first timers were 'Spuds-in-a-Tub' and 'Straw Bale Gardening,' where they are concentrating on bringing new ideas for the whole family to try out in the garden together." **LGR**

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