

# Getting Customers EXCITED

New plants can be a challenge, but here's how you can use them to increase your customer base and boost the bottom line with current shoppers.



By Susan Mertz

**O**n a Saturday afternoon in early March, a local garden club gathers at Family Tree Nursery for their spring kick-off meeting. It's an annual tradition of the club to hold its March meeting at Family Tree's Shawnee, Kansas, location. Kansas weather in March is sometimes cold and dreadful and other times sunny and beautiful.

To the club members, the weather doesn't matter. After a long winter, they are excited to talk about plants and shop for plants.

The members have no interest in reviewing the minutes of the last meeting or hearing the treasurer's report. They just want to get the meeting underway and learn what's new at the nursery! And, Family Tree Nursery always makes certain new plants are included in the presentation and handouts.

Bringing in and growing new plants can be challenging for garden centers. A segment of your customer base loves learning about and trying new plants. And, they are willing to pay a higher price point.

Another group sticks with the same tried-and-true varieties with purse strings that may be a bit tighter. Convincing the latter group of customers to try a more expensive, licensed plant in a branded container can be difficult.

## Beginning With a Knowledgeable Team

Knowledgeable employees are key to the success of introducing new plants to customers at Family Tree Nursery.

Family owned, with three locations in greater Kansas City, weekly staff training sessions are a time to learn about new arrivals and new introductions along with their key selling points. This is in addition to the on-the-job coaching that takes place daily.

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Employees are encouraged to try new plants at home, check out the display gardens at the nursery, attend industry events and visit trial gardens.

Jesse Nelson, a store manager and grandson of the founder, Ron, believes this gives independent garden centers the advantage over box stores.

Preparing staff for potential customer questions is part of the staff training at Fort Collins Nursery. Jesse Eastman, owner, knows it helps with introducing new plants to customers and getting them out of their comfort zones.

Emerald ash borer is a hot topic in Colorado and it's vital at Fort Collins Nursery that staff is up-to-date on the topic. With talking points ready,

employees are able to explain why ash trees are no longer available.

Having answers ready for the customers' questions helps build trust and makes it easier to guide customers in selecting replacement trees with new varieties.

## Drawing on the Resources of the Brands

At the local level, industry groups and universities are instrumental in influencing consumer decisions on what to plant.

Plant Select in Colorado, Prairie Star Flowers in Kansas and Grow Native! in Missouri are just a few of the regional plant brands.

On a national level, First Editions, Southern Living and Proven Winners have extensive consumer reach and marketing campaigns attracting both novice and experienced gardeners.

The marketing resources of regional and national brands help stretch the garden center's marketing budget.

Alice Longfellow, co-owner of Longfellow's Garden Center in central Missouri, appreciates the training opportunities they provide to her garden center team.

The plant knowledge and marketing tools the national sales representatives share with garden center staff is then passed on to the customers.

Longfellow also appreciates the POP signage provided by the different brands. Displays of flowering plants in branded containers with a large colorful sign help grab a customer's attention.

## Let's Ask Amy



"There are no dumb questions when it comes to your yard."

Connecting with both novice and experienced gardeners, Amy is answering gardening questions from all across the country.

She is learning about gardening as she goes, something Amy has in common with many gardeners. Very approachable, she is sharing her gardening experiences with homeowners.

Let's Ask Amy, a question-and-answer forum, was started this year by First Editions, a brand of Bailey Nurseries. Plant recommendations, fertilizing and pruning tips, along with design ideas are some of the topics covered.

New to gardening, a homeowner apologetically asked about plants that are easy to grow in his zone and wasn't sure where to start.

Amy's response included:

- Don't worry about being new to gardening! We are all learning as we go.
- The best place to begin is to learn about

where you want to garden in your yard. How much sun or shade do you have? What is your soil like — clay, sandy, rocky, nice topsoil? Does it rain regularly or will you water?

Helping build confidence, sharing knowledge and assisting consumers with becoming successful gardeners are important components of the Let's Ask Amy gardening forum.

Let's Ask Amy also helps drive traffic to local garden centers. When gardeners are struggling with where to find plants or need additional resources, Amy refers them to their local nursery.

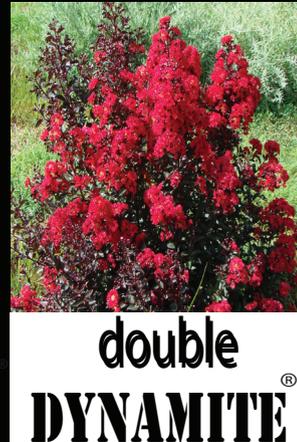
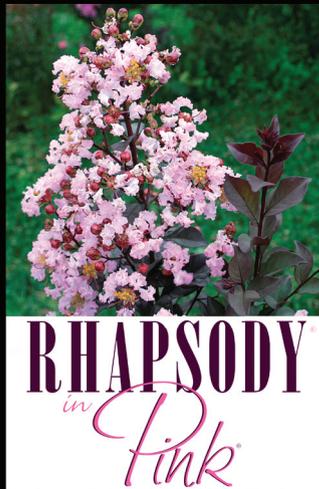
In addition to the question, a field for zip code is included on the online form. With that information, gardeners are given a list of nearby garden centers to contact.

Let's Ask Amy is just one way a national brand is helping sell plants in your store. To learn more, go to [www.firsteditionsplants.com/letsaskamy](http://www.firsteditionsplants.com/letsaskamy).

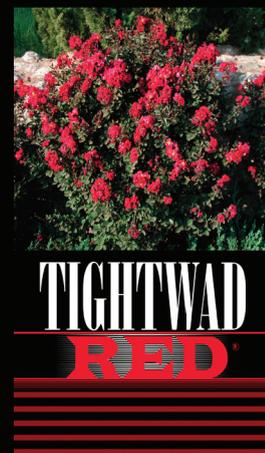
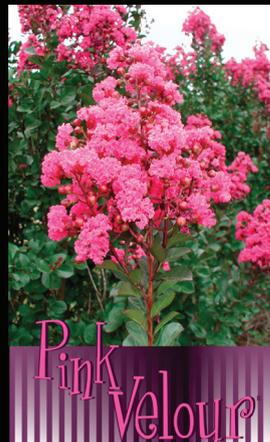
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"It's easier to convince a customer to try a new plant if it's part of an established line," says Eastman of Fort Collins Nursery.

Helping to create a buzz about new plants, Longfellow recognizes the value of the advertisements national brands run in consumer magazines and on both radio and television.

She is also aware of their effectiveness with garden writers and social media in promoting new plants. The messages on a national level are then reinforced at the local garden center.

### Talking About New Plants

Longfellow discusses new plants on her radio show, "The Garden Spot," every Saturday morning. It's an opportunity to market to both new and existing customers. But, she knows that people want to see what the plants look like.

Social media, plant talks around town and email campaigns help fill that gap.

To a distribution of 20,000 customers, Fort Collins Nursery includes a column on new plants in their e-newsletter campaigns.

The nursery's customer programs begin in March with Perennial Palooza. For three days, No. 1 perennials, grasses and vines are 50 percent off. For customers timid about trying new plants, this is a great opportunity.

Spring open house events are an ideal opportunity to promote and display new plants.

Longfellow's Garden Center starts their weekend open house on a Friday with a wine and cheese reception for their loyalty members. The remainder of the weekend is open to the public and includes plant talks, garden workshops, cooking demonstrations and open house specials.

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Parking is always at a premium at Family Tree Nursery's spring event in March. This year's three-day event included elaborate displays with new plants, a "cooking up containers" workshop, children's activities, live music, refreshments and specials.

Kicking off the weekend open house with Ladies Day on Friday, it's a social event combined with shopping. Friends invite friends, shopping carts fill with plants and the atmosphere is festive.

Open houses, plant talks and workshops are great opportunities to distribute printed marketing materials on new introductions.

Family Tree Nursery's calendar has both coupons and garden recipes. The garden recipes, featuring combinations of plants, help give customers confidence to start designing their entryway, walkway or backyard.

Reference guides include designations of Prairie Star selections and Family Tree Nursery employee favorites — another tool to help build confidence and trust.

Positioning your garden center as a trusted, reliable source of information and quality plants makes it easier to introduce new plants to your customers.

Make it a priority to train employees on new plants, incorporate the marketing resources of the national and regional brands and talk about new plants with your customers. You will find that sales of new introductions increase along with your customer base. **LGR**

*Susan Mertz is the owner of [www.inthegarden.buzz](http://www.inthegarden.buzz). She can be reached at [susan@botanicalshots.com](mailto:susan@botanicalshots.com).*



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