



Sorting Through the Gifts

The gift category can be overwhelming, but a little help from your peers might lead you in the right direction.

By Carrie Burns

We've been to quite a few garden centers around the United States and Europe, and through those trips we've discovered that there are hundreds of product categories that can be considered gifts. Gift departments are often a smorgasbord of collectibles, picture frames, candles, apparel, etc. Just about anything can be a gift; so we were curious about what to do with this department: how some of you display such a broad product offering, how you decide what to buy and...well...how you run your gift department. What we found is that people are all over the board, so we found two garden centers to typify the ends of the spectrum when it comes to philosophies about the gift department.

When it comes to the category of gifts, just like any other category within your store, you have to decide who you are and just how the category will fit in. Boxwoods Gardens & Gifts, Atlanta, Ga., is just what the name implies. "We are ⅓ gifts, ⅓ garden and ⅓ antique," said Dan Belman, co-owner. So, they focus very heavily on gifts. On the other end of the spectrum is Alden Lane Nurseries, Livermore, Calif. "We are in the plant and garden business," said Jacqueline Courtright, owner. "I treat gifts as a lovely accessory to the garden business. It's definitely not our main business; we do it as a convenience and to provide inspiration to the customers." For both of these businesses, their philosophies work because they know their

market and their customers. You also have to remember who you are when you're buying and displaying gifts in your store.

BUYING

Trends are always a help when it comes to buying gifts. Boxwoods considers the trends when buying, and gift shows are a great place to see these trends. "We go to gift shows. Randy [Korando, co-owner] and I go to Europe four times a year on buying trips to see emerging trends and for antiques," said Belman. "We also go throughout the United States on buying trips."

Courtright has seen a more general trend that has emerged over the 50-plus years Alden Lane has been open. "I think we're getting back to garden gifts," said Courtright. "We certainly do hand lotions and potpourri that is very botanical, but I think we're going to be moving away from the more 'plush' gifts. I think we're coming full circle back to the garden gift/botanical kind of category."

And, don't forget to use a little of your taste when it comes to buying. "We don't buy anything we don't personally like," said Belman, "and we strive to truthfully have bang for the buck. So whether it's an inexpensive item or, in some cases, a very expensive item we have to feel like it's a good value."

Light

LeashLite is a small light device with three white LEDs. It mounts and/or clips to any retractable or conventional leash. Just attach it to the top of a leash or to your dog's collar. It is also ideal for hands-free tasking like changing a tire, working under the hood or under the sink. The LeashLite comes with high-capacity lithium batteries that provide more than 15 hours of light, and it is covered by a five-year warranty. CMI. (800) 264-7652.

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Backpack

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Candle

This large two-wick candle is made of crystalline, all-natural vegetable wax. It is available in 15 color-infused scent medleys, including the newest fragrance, Jasmine & Sage, which exudes serenity and femininity. JOYAcandle. (718) 852-6979. Write in 1495



DISPLAY

One thing that Boxwoods and Alden Lane seemed to have in common is their philosophies on displaying gifts — make sure they're shoppable. "I think the lesson we've learned over the years is that it is important to have what I call buyable critical mass," said Courtright. "The display should not be so lean and beautiful that customers are afraid to ruin the beautiful display." Belman agrees that the displays should be well stocked. "The expression you can't sell off an empty cart holds true for us," added Belman. "We never have an empty cart; sometimes it's even hard to see the cart."

So now you know you have to fill up that display, but what should it look like. Garden center owners often find ideas from lots of different places. For example, Alden Lane finds ideas from other retail outlets. "Traveling, going on roadshows, visiting different regions of the country really helps with ideas," said Courtright. "We're all in the same business, but there's this fabulous creativity, and what [the other garden centers] do is different even when they're faced with the same set of needs or challenges; they all meet those challenges in a different way, and I think that's so fun to see. We look to see what we can adapt or multiply."

Boxwoods finds inspiration in its employees' excitement. "We generate display ideas internally just on a whim," explained Belman. "It depends on what products are coming in. We're excited about a product when we buy

it, and it's exciting to the people who take care of receiving and display; it makes it easy if you're displaying fun stuff that you're excited about."

YOUR MARKET

These two garden centers have two very different philosophies on the world of gifts, and some of it might apply to you.

For Boxwood, with their focus on gifts, more is better. "If a little is good, then a lot is better," said Belman. "So we over-merchandise — we stock a lot," which works for them; gifts are a huge part of their business.

But, if the focus of your business is far from the gift world, it doesn't make much sense to invest a lot of money in gifts. "Through our time in gifts we certainly got to the point where we had a whole warehouse full," said Courtright. "And it was really scary at the end of the year — instead of handing out checks for bonuses [we were thinking] maybe it'll be a case of soap. All of our profit ended up in the warehouse."

Last words of wisdom were given perfectly by Belman, "Don't rest on your laurels." No matter what your market is, the gift category will always take a lot of work to master. ■

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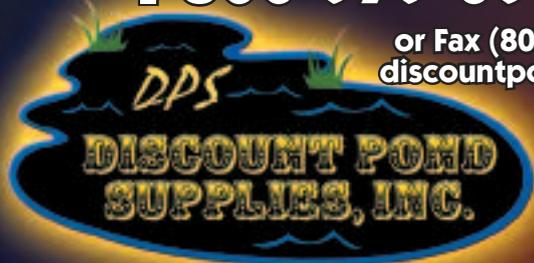
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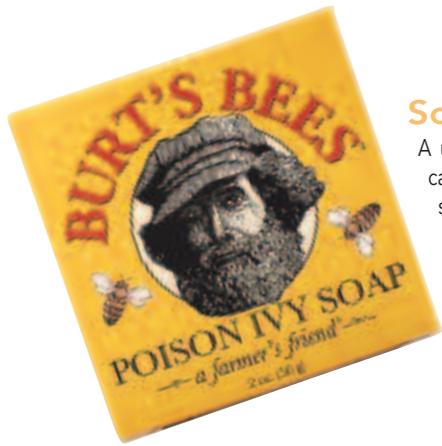
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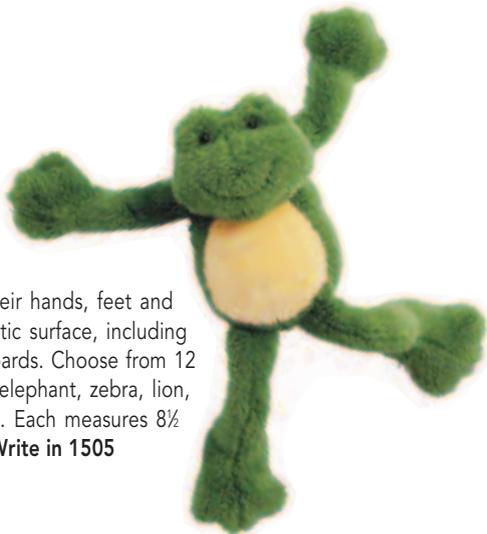
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Magnet

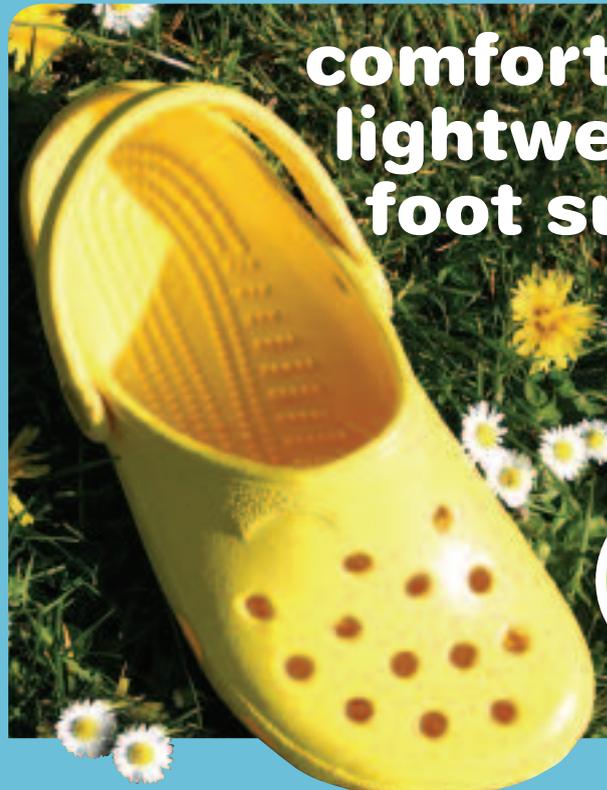
These animals have magnets in their hands, feet and back and can hang on any magnetic surface, including refrigerators and magnetic blackboards. Choose from 12 characters: pig, horse, bear, cow, elephant, zebra, lion, monkey, cat, frog, bunny and dog. Each measures 8 1/2 inches tall. Gund. (973) 227-8600. **Write in 1505**



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