

Ah, the power of the press! But in an age where consumer print publications are cutting back on the pages they give to gardening, it may be time to foster relationships elsewhere. Start with local garden bloggers, who could hold the key to reaching your tech-savvy younger consumers...and more!

By Mr. Brown Thumb



I'm not a professional gardener nor am I a professional garden writer. I'm a garden blogger.

At the last Chicago Flower & Garden Show I mentioned I was a garden blogger to a vendor, who then asked me what a garden blogger was. Her daughter was sitting in their booth looked up and said, "Duh, Mom. He blogs about gardening," as if it pained her to have to explain something so simple. The daughter rolled her eyes, lowered her head and went back to surfing the Internet on the laptop before her.

Blog, for those who aren't familiar, is the shortened form of "weblog" (see "The Write Stuff" in the February 2009 issue of *Lawn & Garden Retailer*). At its very core, a garden blog is simply a garden journal that's accessible to anyone with

an Internet connection, which allows the writer to interact with readers.

In an age when the consumer print industry is devoting less and less space, if any, to gardening, and professional garden writers are finding themselves without regular work, garden blogs are filling a void. The garden blog is becoming the gardening column of what was once your local paper. The majority of garden blogs are maintained by average gardeners who write about things like what's in bloom in the garden, garden pests and even plant sales at garden centers like yours.

Communicating with Bloggers

Recently, I was visiting a number of local garden centers to compile information on plant sales to write for a blog I maintain. At one stop,

I explained to the employee on duty that I was a garden blogger and asked him to tell me about what was on sale so I could write about it. His response, while courteous, shocked me. He declined to talk to me about the sale before he asked the owner, who was on the phone in an office somewhere, for permission to talk to me about the sale. You figure that one out.

On the other end of the spectrum: I get a lot of unsolicited press releases and mass e-mails from garden centers and various folks in the industry because of my gardening blogs. Most of these go unread or marked as spam without a second thought. An independent garden blogger doesn't have deadlines to meet or pressure to create content from the flood of e-mails and press releases. The garden blog is updated when the writer



Would your employees know what to do if a garden blogger came in to interview someone from your store about a current sale or products you offer?



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Blogs *to Know*

Even if your store doesn't blog, it's worth checking out what some of your local bloggers — and maybe even some in the national spotlight — are saying. Here are a few must-read blogs, written by everyday gardeners, professional garden writers and industry associations alike, from Managing Editor Paige Worthy's personal Google Reader list.

- Mr. Brown Thumb: mrbrownthumb.blogspot.com
- Kiss My Aster: www.hortmag.com/kissmyaster
- The Garden of Words: thegardenofwords.wordpress.com
- The Garden Plot: gardenplot.blogspot.com
- Muddy Boot Dreams: muddybootdreams.blogspot.com
- ANLA Management Clinic: www.managementclinic.org/blogs/clinic10
- Garden Rant: www.gardenrant.com
- Grow It. Eat It.: heatergirlie.blogspot.com
- Urban Organic Gardener: www.urbanorganicgardener.com
- Life on the Balcony: lifeonthebalcony.com

has something to share, usually something exciting about the garden.

It seems many of the people hired to do marketing and public relations for garden centers are pruning the relationships from public relations. A happy medium exists — for me — between the two examples I provided, one where building a relationship with your local garden bloggers takes center stage. Personally, press releases and mass e-mails inform me of nothing more than the fact that you don't know who I am. There was probably a time when you knew the author

of your local gardening column because he or she was involved in the local garden club, shopped in your garden center or was a friend of a friend. Make an effort to get to know garden bloggers in your area and develop a relationship that goes beyond just sending them press releases when you get a new line of containers in.

Find Your Bloggers

Don't know if you have a garden blogger in your area? Do a Google search for the name of your garden center in quotation marks.

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You may already have been visited by one and don't even know it. Set up a Google Alert for the name of your garden center and be notified whenever a garden blog mentions you in a post. Conduct a search for

the term "garden blog+ (your town, city or state)" to locate local garden blogs. Look over the blogroll (a list of similarly themed blogs, usually on the left or right margins of the site) to find more. When you find

one visit their garden blog and leave comments, reach out and say hello and invite him or her to your garden center for a tour and a cup of coffee. If you're lucky enough to have more than one garden blog in your area, invite all of the writers and make it an event. Once you've developed a rapport with these garden bloggers, ask them if they would like to receive regular e-mails or receive early notifications of sales, mark-downs, classes, workshops or services you offer.

I should warn you that garden bloggers often travel in packs and have been known to cross state lines to meet other garden bloggers and visit garden centers. The trick is to be friendly; just don't be so friendly they never want to leave.

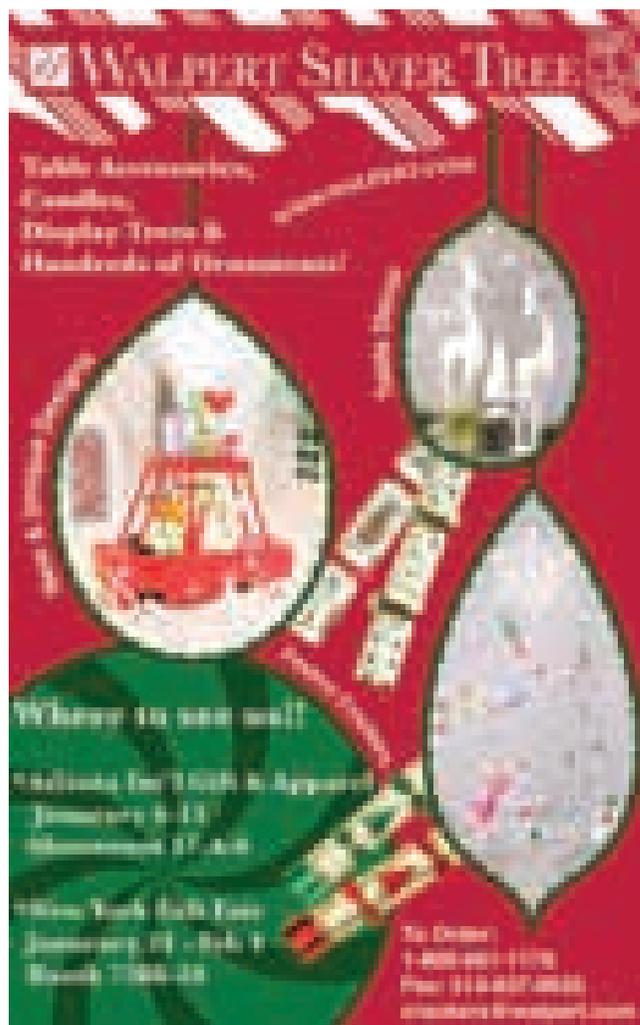
Mr. Brown Thumb (a pseudonym, obviously) is a Chicago-based garden blogger who keeps a personal blog (mrbrownthumb.blogspot.com) as well as one on ChicagoNow, an online affiliate of the Tribune Company (www.chicagonow.com/blogs/chicago-garden). He can be reached at mrbrownthumb@gmail.com.

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