

class of 2013

Not too long ago, my wife Sara and I and our puppy Olive made a big move across the country — Chicago to Phoenix.

A Midwesterner my whole life, the realization of 110-degree spring days is something that's still going to take a little getting used to. Funny thing, it doesn't really get hot until 105° F.

Speaking of getting used to, my whole gardening game is out of whack.

I have no problem admitting that I've never been a plant geek, or anything close, despite my five years as an editor in this great industry or, more importantly, my 10 years of garden center retail experience in Cleveland loading up cars, restocking pallets of mulch and watering veggies.

And anything I've been able to glean from my hands-on experiences is Midwest exclusive and that's somewhat limited to annuals and edibles. Woe, is me.

So here I am in "The Valley" with nothing but blue skies, nonexistent humidity and unrelenting, full-sun exposure.

Our first trip to our local garden center was a real eye-opener. It was May 1. We drove there without a game plan. Bad idea. I wandered around Berridge Nurseries like a mad man with no direction. No matter how many times the staff tried to offer up help (I think they saw my deer-in-the-headlights look), my stubborn self would brush them off with a "We're good, thanks." I wanted to figure this out on my own. Bad idea No. 2.

Thirty minutes in and \$36 later, our to-go box had one succulent and a mix of annuals — heavy on the portulaca. It wasn't the trip either of us had expected. And yes, my stubbornness is at fault for most of it.

commencement speech

My little anecdote isn't a lead in to ask you how you handle stubborn customers. We're an impossible lot. I'm more interested in your Class of 2013. You know, the first timers — to your store or to gardening in general.

Right now on the calendar, we're surrounded by summer. Have you given much thought to how your Class of 2013 is doing?

Remember the ones who wanted three tomato plants in one 12-inch pot or the couple new to the neighborhood interested in spending boatloads to create a natural fence for a little backyard privacy? Hopefully with the help of your expert staff, these novices were guided down a better path.

But once they leave your parking lot it's a whole new ball game.

July can be a make or break month for new gardeners. They came into your garden center with expectations — realistic or not. Are they coming to fruition? As we speak, they're deciding whether or not they have the chops to do this thing called gardening.

oh the places you will go

You know the old saying: Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.

This has a lot to do with how your staff interacts with the customer. I know making the sale is important. But when they go out into the real world with their new green and leafy purchases, a little proactive support can go a long way.

Prepare them for the unexpected. And whether it comes in the form of an email or a simple phone call to check-in, what's wrong with encouraging your staff to take a special interest in those customers who could use a little extra support? They're easy to spot.

If I wasn't so stubborn, I could sure use that phone call right about now. **LGR**




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