

SELLING *to a* NEW "GARDENER"

Consider the potential of mixed containers and packaged plant collections in a new and changing marketplace.

By Gerry Giorgio and John Martens

Do you know where and how Americans garden? We have this idea of gardening that includes flower borders, mulching, weeding, watering and all manner of chores that, when done, can result in a spectacular garden. But is that reality? Is that an accurate view of how people really garden? We think not and would like to explore some thoughts that could change the way you approach your business.

First, let's look at the whole concept of gardening. We may still have the idea that when people shop for plants, they are interested in gardening as an activity. But what really might dictate their interest is where and how they live.

Even homeowners, who have the space for a garden, have many options competing for their time and money. So consider this:

When people who live in single-family homes hear the word "gardening" they might hear the word "work."

When people who live in multifamily developments (apartments and condos) hear the word gardening they might think it doesn't apply to them.

No time for gardening. No space for gardening. These are some factors of why someone might not have a traditional garden. Another is the location in which plants must be part of our immediate environment to be enjoyed.

These are not the concerns of true gardeners. They are committed to gardening and will find their way to do it.

Rather, this is what's on the mind of flower appreciators, decorators and average people who like the color, fragrance, beauty and good feelings of having flowers and vegetables, but would never consider themselves "gardeners."

One hypothesis is that what drives a large portion of our plant sales, and has the potential to drive even greater sales of plants, will hinge on our ability to understand the S.T.P. of gardening; Space, Time and Proximity.

- **Space:** We have less and less space to garden with. Utilizing more space for gardening means more work. We want to contain and control our gardening space.

- **Time:** Although we might have more leisure time now than in years past,



Packaged plant collections can offer inspiration outside the garden in compact spaces. Theme these mixes such as this kitchen idea of greens for smoothies.



Signage can completely change how customers see a container. Remember that when creating a mix, use tagging that speaks to the finished product as a whole.

there is much more competition for this time.

• **Proximity:** We want our plants close to us. We want them in or near our living environment. We want to enjoy their beauty and reap their harvest.

A Changing Market

Consider for a minute where and how people live now and where and how people will live in the future.

Because no matter how or what we tell people about the beauty and enjoyment of gardening, it really all boils down to where they live, how much space they have and how much time they will devote to gardening, especially if they perceive it to be work.

The desire to grow and enjoy plants isn't limited to those who have the time and space to grow an in-ground garden.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, multifamily housing comprises 14 percent of all suburban housing and looks like it will continue to grow. Multifamily building starts were up 115 percent in December 2012 according to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). The NAHB also forecasted multifamily construction projects

to increase another 31 percent the next year.

An increasing number of married couples also are bypassing homeownership; they accounted for 50 percent of the growth in renter households over the last five years (U.S. News & World Report).

Multifamily building permits are now being issued at a rate of more than 300,000 units per year, according to the NAHB.

When it comes to the suburbs and rural America, we've seen a tremendous increase in interest for various forms of outdoor living environments. In addition to the traditional patio, decks have been a fast growing creation of the interest for outdoor living.

According to the Deck and Porch Injury Study by Legacy Services International, estimates show there are more than 40 million existing decks in the U.S.

Our conclusion is that the American garden may no longer be the flower bed. It's on the patio, deck, balcony and front porch. It's up on a rooftop or in a small strip of dirt near your front step. It's also likely growing in a container. This is a change in our culture that requires us to look at our purpose of selling plants with new eyes.



Containers offer the ease more people are looking for as they choose to live in apartments, condos and rental properties.

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Inspiring Out of the Ground

So, how can this information be considered within the context of selling plants? We don't have all the answers for such a fast-changing market, but we do have some suggestions that might get you moving toward selling products specifically for the new gardener/decorator/flower appreciator.

Ask yourself these questions: Are we doing everything we can to address the needs of the consumer of plants who now lives in an apartment, condo or rental property? Are we providing innovative solutions to the consumers who love plants but are not willing or able to devote a significant portion of their leisure time to gardening in the ground?

A good place to start would be making gardening easy and inspirational. Finished, ready-to-use products such as creatively mixed decorative containers or packaged plant collections provide the inspiration, confidence and ease people are looking for.

On the mixed container side of things, you probably are already doing them. But it may prove profitable to expand and evolve in this category. Get creative!

Mixing perennials with annuals, adding tropical foliage to annual flowers or mixing flowers and vegetables are a good way to keep your stock

interesting. You can name them too to appeal to your customers.

Signage and tagging can further the value by providing more information and inspiration at the point of sale and at home. Images and graphics on signs can help people imagine how and where they can use the containers.

Good tags can carry a theme or name of a mix along with care information that is consistent with the finished, ready-to-use mixed container. What I mean by this is, once plants are mixed into a container, they become a new and different product.

No longer is there a need for individual tags that would carry conflicting information on each plant. It's the whole mix now that is the finished product, carrying the expectations and value for the customer. Consider tagging mixed containers with one of the many options available.

Another way to offer inspiration, confidence and ease is with packaged plant collections.

There will be people who want to grow plants themselves, but that doesn't mean that the best way to serve them is to sell raw materials in the form of an overwhelming selection of flowers and vegetables in every imaginable pot or pack. Instead, a better way would be to offer pre-packaged mixes.

Consider themes containing herbs for chicken,

pizza or an ethnic twist. Think about packaging vegetables and flowers together to create a beautiful and edible container. Offer tropical combinations that are used as seasonal annual containers.

There is no limit to what can be offered in a packaged mix. Having these packaged mixes makes selecting and using plants easier for the average garden center shopper. Many don't know what they want until they see it.

Focus on identifying, creating and merchandising "use-based" marketing solutions that will inspire your customers and make their gardening experience easy from store to home.

Gardening is being redefined by a new generation of people who want the beauty and feel good aspects of plants and flowers in their environment.

These people may no longer look like the traditional gardener, but great opportunity is there for the growers and retailers to get creative and inspired enough to meet them where they are. **LGR**

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