

# Garden Centers Sell More When Foliage is First



By Christina Salwitz

**N**ame a position in any garden center, and I have pretty much worked it. After 30 years in this industry, working through booms and busts, before computers and social media, even before there were box stores, I think I was always about “Gardening with Foliage First” and “Fine Foliage” before it was fashionable to think about designing that way as a focus.

Now it’s all about foliage rather than simple layers of blooming flowers that will fall or fade.

Before my early days in horticulture and becoming a horticulturist and designer, I was a double major in college in both fashion merchandising and marketing.

Skip to present day, and I’m hard pressed to dress myself and far prefer to walk into a store and just tell the salesperson to “just do me.” I’m pretty darn easy to please it seems.

But, what I can tell you that I carried through school and into today’s work is that all the same lessons in fashion and marketing carry over amazingly well to both design and many aspects of my present-day business model.

As you read this, you might not know (if you do, “YOU get a book and YOU get a book and YOU get a book!” Kidding of course, authors don’t write books for the big money that’s for sure!) that I co-authored both “Fine Foliage” (St. Lynn’s Press) and “Gardening with Foliage First” (Timber Press) with Karen Chapman whose business, Le Jardin, creates custom container and landscape designs for clients in the Seattle area.

When we met, we knew immediately that this was a topic worthy of the commitment to possibly more than one book in our future.

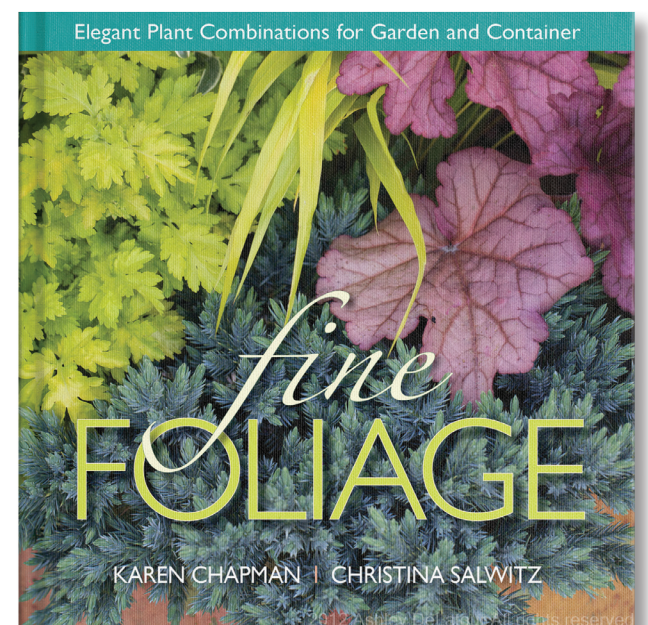
The topic naturally lends itself to an increase in garden center sales if you are trained or are training



to the idea that utilizing foliage of all kinds as a base to build upon with flowers, twigs, thorns, berries, seed-heads and garden art is an incredible starting point.

I like to explain it two ways that resonate with me, and it seems to work with my clients and training across the country as well.

**1.** Think of using a foliage-based design the same as designing a room. You need larger scale furniture before you begin to add in the art and throw pillows as accent colors in your space. That means that the customer you’re working with may shop in the trees and shrubs first, then work their way all the way down to groundcovers to containers and tropical. It also means that



you will need to be guiding them with the right amounts of emphasis on evergreen to deciduous foliage, perennials to annuals, etc.

**2.** Building a great foliage-based design is exactly like putting a fantastic outfit together. You might be starting with an awesome little black dress or the perfect fitting jeans. Either way, you will be layering things on whether it’s jewelry, shoes and other accessories, or a sweater, belt, boots and coat.

It’s not unusual at all to have customers come in who are shy about certain foliage plants or just planting in general. And more often than not, you can discern where this problem stems from in their deep dark gardening past.



I'm here to tell you that it often must do with some sort of juniper they were forced to help dig out or rip out while it was tied to Uncle Bob's truck bumper that flew right off in the process. Therefore, in the customers' eyes all junipers are big bad thugs that

don't deserve room on our collective bumpers. They have automatically dismissed a gazillion juniper options that are tough, colorful, interesting and feature awesome growth habits that won't swallow your whole house in a few years.

Obviously, this fractured tale can encompass any number of plant problems that led to some kind of psycho-social drama, and now that same customer wants to only invite plants to their party who will stay small, be evergreen and never need

any intervention or shearing with a chainsaw.

The counseling with this customer needs to be both firm and delicate. The trauma of carrying that plant murder story is now family lore and larger than life.

One of the best ways around this that I have discovered is to shuffle through some handy phone photos and ask them, do you like this idea? Or this one? Or how about this one?

They will, almost without fail, react with a resounding "Yes!" It's then that I drop the giant leafy hort-bomb

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that blows their mind when I explain that they can't have this look without an appropriate balance of evergreen, deciduous and perennial.

And, not only that, but if everything they want in their chosen arena blooms or only looks great in spring, then they will have a very boring, monotone landscape the rest of the year and when you think about your real estate taxes, who has time for plants that don't pull their own weight in curb appeal for the other months of the growing year?

Now, we have an appropriately softened up customer who is willing to talk about their foliage options if you have buyers who understand that you may indeed need 47 colors of heuchera, specialty conifers that of course turn beautiful colors in winter, possibly many more named viburnum hybrids, tons of gorgeous herbs and edibles that could hold their own with amazing foliage, and art.

We will need garden art to sell in some incredible containers featuring foliage that is screaming for just the right piece of glass to provide the right color echo of the vein in that leaf.

In my books, we have a saying that might help you sell more and simply cut to the chase with one epic phrase: "Flowers are fleeting, foliage is forever."

Take that pink petunia people, unless you're pairing it with a 'Pink Passion' cordyline, and then we could totally hang out together. **LGR**

*Christina Salwitz, the Personal Garden Coach, is a container designer, public speaker, horticultural guidance counselor and photojournalist based in Renton, Washington. She can be reached at [personalgardencoach@comcast.net](mailto:personalgardencoach@comcast.net).*

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