

INCORPORATING ACTIVISM

As Greenscape Gardens in Missouri has discovered, the possibilities for turning conservation efforts into profits are endless.

By Laura Caldie

The new buzzword in marketing is advocacy. I just returned from an entire conference about how to use this model in your business, with brand representatives from tech industry giants like Dell and Cisco, and loads of Silicon Valley startups too. These folks are scrambling to find ways to make their companies feel authentic enough for today's consumers to trust them — a lofty task when you exist solely in the digital sphere.

As the only representative at Advocamp from the horticulture industry, I was thrilled to see they were modeling all the methods we've found successful in our journey at Greenscape Gardens in Ballwin, Missouri.

It's 2018, and people no longer seem to believe any information being fed to them. The Edelman Trust Barometer indicates that trust broadly declined last year in every key institution — business, government, non-governmental organizations and the media.

This may sound like a problem for those of us running small businesses, but it could also be a surprising opportunity to empower clientele to take action.

Why not harness this skepticism and show people how to foster a balanced environment in their own yards, instead of relying on policy to protect wild spaces?

The Target Customer

Not everyone self identifies as an environmentalist, but I think it's safe to say there's widespread support for conservation, so long as it doesn't get in the way of "progress."

Our industry has been pushed in the direction of cultivating natives, pollinator-friendly plants, and edibles for the last few years, and the trend doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon.

But gardening as an activity has a PR problem. It sounds like an awful lot of work to the average convenience-obsessed consumer. By repositioning our garden centers as experts in environmental sustainability, that demonstrate the tangible benefits of exposure to more nature, I believe we can build a movement that will be profitable to retailers and ecologically impactful at the same time.

So, to whom are we marketing?

Back in 2014 Monrovia did a study that still feels in line with our customer demographic. They found 46 percent of consumers are practical problem solvers that want easy-to-maintain landscapes. The quickest growing group was "Zen Gardeners" at 16 percent, which represents the eco-conscious younger generations that see plants as a way to reconnect with nature and live a healthy lifestyle. The demographic most in decline were the dedicated plant collectors at 26 percent, who have been the traditional bread and butter of this industry, but are starting to age out of intensive gardening and already have a full landscape.

To stay competitive, we're going to have to appeal to the Problem Solvers and Zen Gardeners, while gradually changing the mindsets of others.

At Greenscape Gardens, we've been moving in this direction since around 2012 and have seen promising results.

Organization Connections

We were one of the first garden centers in the St. Louis metro area to stock a wide variety of natives, but our success in selling them was due largely to the organizations that shared this story for us.

From 2012, when we started the "Show Me the Monarchs" program, to 2017, our numbers support this steady growth. Customer count has gone up 32 percent, and average sale per customer is up 41 percent, at \$80.74.

At first, most of our regular customers were shy to explore the "wilder" section tucked at the back of the store, but the "natives enthusiasts" were thrilled to have access to the plants they desired.



MARKETING

By collaborating with The Audubon Society, WildOnes!, The Missouri Prairie Foundation, GrowNative!, The St. Louis Zoo, and many others, these passionate conservationists came out, and they told their friends about us too.

Word-of-mouth marketing, or WOM, is known to be at least two times as effective as traditional advertising. Therefore, every dollar spent on generating it will go twice as far, but it only works if your advocates are truly excited about what you have to offer.

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When we run a program like the Pollinator Palette, where we distributed free native plugs with every purchase, we consider this part of the WOM budget.

By inspiring customers to talk about you, money can be saved through reduced spending on traditional

media outlets or coupons. WOM also includes the digital sphere, so finding ways to cheaply encourage online reviews and social media shares is helpful too.

Homeowners make up a good percentage of our customers, but organizational connections can also facilitate new markets for sales that have barely been tapped.

Many of our native sales today are coordinated through a program with the Missouri Botanical Garden that connects schools wanting pollinator gardens with the resources to create them.

Therefore, the institutions we partner with are a part of the sales team, making referrals we never anticipated. In a world of declining natural spaces, many grants are available to groups that want to re-invigorate them, but sourcing the materials (and expertise) is the main challenge.

In addition to these sales initiatives, we have a weekly summer meet-up program to give free advice on various aspects of gardening and health.

We tend to shy away from topics that are distinctly about pollinators and natives, but instead slip some element of ecological restoration into every talk that we can.

The Role of Edibles

In this way we're prompting people to make habitat health a consideration in every decision, from basic tree selection to edible landscape design. This allows us to nurture the customer's inner conservationist, and reinforce the idea that plants serve many purposes.

These classes are an imperative part of our business model because they position us as thought leaders in our community.

Don't fret if very few people come at first; what's important is that you're displaying your expertise. This, in and of itself, makes you distinctly different from box stores, online shops and anywhere else trying to sell lower quality plants.

While many people are getting hip to natives, their unsung counterparts — edible plants — are poised for a cultural revolution of their own. The momentum of pollinator awareness is a logical bridge into food crops (and vice versa), and regionally adapted varieties both old and new make growing your own food easy and fun.

Urban community gardens are taking off, and people certainly don't trust the industrial agriculture system as the best source of healthy foods.

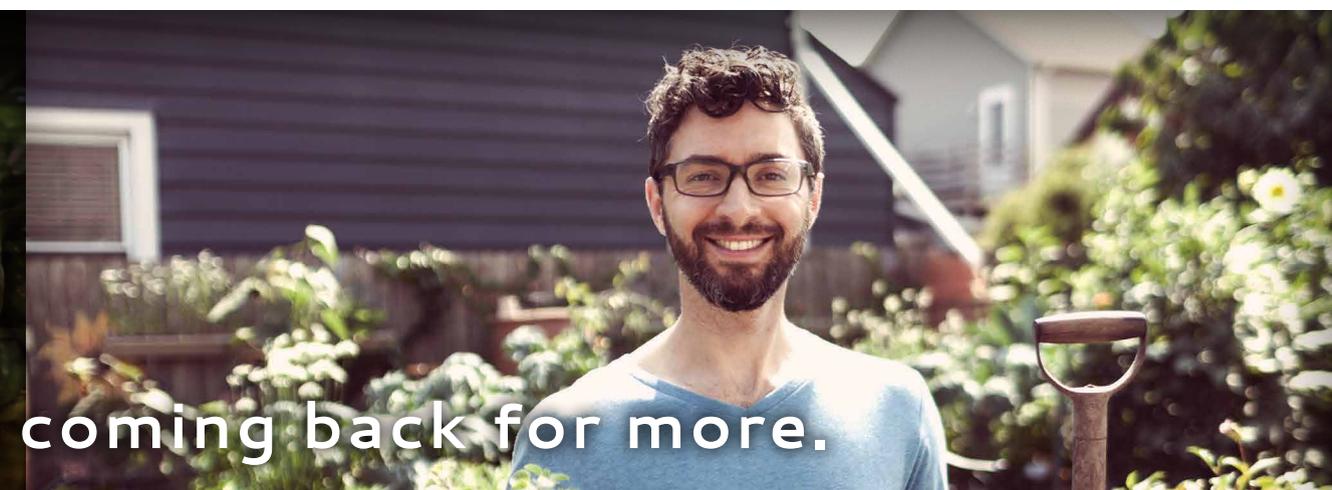
Much like the Victory Gardens movement of the 1940s, people today are inspired to take action, but this time the motivation is a war for the planet herself.

Advocating for home veggie gardens translates to less reliance on destructive farming practices, and this stance will bring in another group of supporters and partnerships.

The National Pollinator Garden Network (NPGN) is leading the push for integrating pollinator plants with edibles, so why not take the jump and market them together on your sales floor? Campaigns like NPGN are essentially free marketing from garden writers and organizers to more people that care, so getting on-board is an effortless way to ride the wave of consumer advocacy.

Identifying Conservation Opportunities in Your Area

This commitment to conservation and restoration doesn't have to stop at suggesting the right plants for the job.



Keep customers coming back for more.

Savor™ is the freshest new line of vegetables and herbs, exclusively from Pleasant View Gardens. Customers don't need green thumbs to grow Savor. They just need a mix of interest and appetite. That's because Savor uses superior plant genetics that deliver higher performance and yield. And we're always developing new plants to get onto your shelves and into their gardens. This all creates happy customers who keep growing, eating, and coming back to your store for more.

There are many possibilities to retrain even our more traditional customers on the newest revelations in ecological planting techniques. This could be the lush, biodiverse plant community model of Claudia West, where woodland groundcovers weave between sun-loving structural layers, with no mulch to be seen.



It could be offering a receptacle for leaf litter drop-off and selling the mulch as a locally made soil amendment in the spring.

It could be preaching the word of Professor Doug Tallamy and highlighting the plants that most impact songbird and wildlife preservation.

Maybe you even want to train some staff members in Permaculture Design, to learn about closed loop systems that model patterns of nature, thereby transforming the way they build a functional landscape.

Take some time to evaluate what causes are getting attention in your neck of the woods and elevate those concerns with your business. Ours was monarch migration, but yours doesn't have to be.

These tactics will likely need modification for more rural garden centers, but the core concept remains.

If we don't differentiate ourselves by incorporating activism into our sales messaging, we're not likely to stay competitive.

Today's consumers can sniff out inauthenticity a mile away, and are less interested in deals than the feeling of spending dollars thoughtfully.

Aligning yourself with non-profits and other driven organizations has the added benefit of giving you a hiring advantage too. Young people like myself want to feel that they are making a net positive impact with their career choices, but many of the obvious jobs where we could do so don't pay enough to make ends meet.

By turning to a new model of environmental advocacy, you'll find more diverse recruitment opportunities and lots of fresh ideas.

Despite the stigma that millennials don't know the value of hard work, in my experience we're just

unlikely to give our best to people and places we don't deem worthy ... and the same holds true for our paychecks.

Changing the formula for success is never a painless process, but we've all seen competitors and neighbors closing their doors, and would rather not succumb to that.

I challenge you to beat the bullet by building a truly interactive sales floor, where the merits of a life spent outside are obvious, sensory and inclusive to the critters that share our ecosystems.

Environmentalism may not be your favorite word, but shying away from it could be a death sentence. For your business, and yes, I'm going there, the state of the world as we know it too. **LGR**



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