

Marketing Water-Wise Plants

Hear from three garden centers in one of the most water-conscious states about how focusing on plants with low water requirements can be beneficial no matter where you're located.

By Pat Hayward

Colorado's population is expected to nearly double between 2000 and 2040. Most of this growth is happening along the eastern slope of the Rockies, in areas where our average annual precipitation is less than 15 inches.

Our water challenges are exacerbated by the fact that Colorado's average domestic water use is 130 gallons per day per person, as opposed to an average of 82 gallons per day in non-western

states. Outdoor water use accounts for about 55 percent of residential water use in this area, mostly on turf.

Through a combination of climate change and increased demand throughout the entire water chain, our water supply is actually dropping, yet more folks are moving in (darn that healthy living culture!).

Luckily for those of us in the green industry, lots of these folks want to garden. We haven't had serious

water restrictions for a couple of years, but saving water is always in the back of residents' minds.

Here are some creative ways that three independent garden centers along Colorado's Front Range are meeting the challenge of providing "adaptable yet beautiful" to consumers looking for water-wise plants.

Most garden centers find that grouping plants by cultural conditions is the easiest way to help customers find choices for their specific sites.

Nick's Garden Center



Nick's Garden Center (Aurora) is one of the region's largest and busiest garden centers. Employing 65 people during peak season, 40 of them year-round, Nick's is famous for its family-friendly atmosphere and enthusiastically cheerful owners and staff.

Every plant department display is bold and uniquely identified — Nick's contracts with a local artisan sign maker to have department signs custom designed. This creates a coherent brand message within the nursery, using sub-brands to enhance the garden center's unique and local brand.

During spring sales months, Nick's brings in "celebrity" guests to promote regional specialties, including experts from Denver Botanic Gardens and national plant suppliers.

In addition to dedicated Plant Select and Xeriscape sections, they've even created a "Panayoti's Picks" area featuring water-wise and rock garden plants hand selected by Panayoti Kelaidis, renowned curator and horticulturist from Denver Botanic Gardens.

The latest and greatest display area in the perennials department is "Nick's Cool Little Plants for Small Spaces" bench top garden display. It began about eight years ago displaying alpine and

rock garden plants from Laporte Avenue Nursery, a specialty wholesale grower in Fort Collins. Over time it expanded to include Plant Select Petites, Stepables, Rock Stars, dwarf conifers and other hardy, diminutive plants. (Alpine and rock garden plants are extremely popular here, reminding gardeners of the Colorado Rockies mountain landscapes.)

Once a standard display bench, it's now reinforced with steel I-beams to hold small boulders interplanted with labeled display plants. Large, colorful signs hang above the display describing the tiny treasures. Garden images suggest landscape and garden design ideas.

Nick's also works closely with the City of Aurora's Water Conservation Specialist, Zach Versluis, to make sure they're offering the plants recommended through the city, and to stay up-to-date on water restriction and water supply issues.

The City of Aurora offers an extensive program for their utility consumers, including landscape consultation, landscape retrofit rebates, and a full range of educational workshops. This collaboration is critical because the city's efforts direct attendees to local garden centers to purchase specific, recommended plants.



Fort Collins Nursery

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Circle 108

At Fort Collins Nursery (Fort Collins), perennials needing less water are displayed in a large section titled "Low Water." They've specifically chosen not to use the word "xeriscape" after finding that newer gardeners were more confused by the term than helped by it.

Fort Collins Nursery also has a dedicated Plant Select (see sidebar) section featuring perennial and groundcover winners from the program. Branded tags, signs and bench tape help draw customers to the display benches.

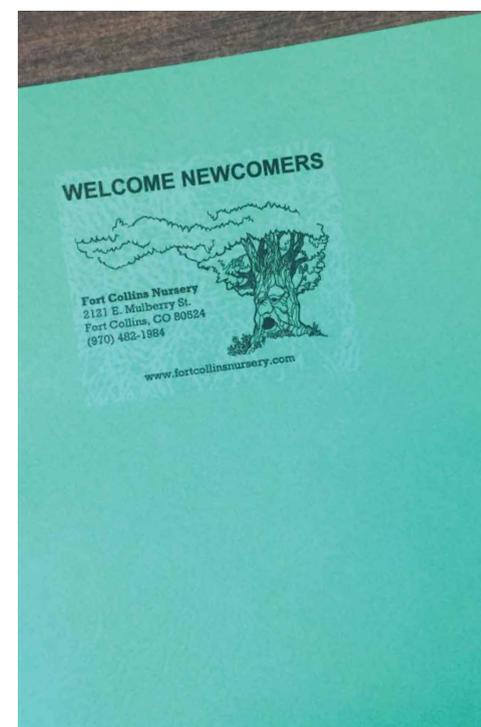
This is also one of the first places the staff takes customers who start the conversation, "I just moved here and don't know where to start." When they switched to this dedicated display, sales of Plant Select plants rose more than 25 percent.

Fort Collins Nursery prides itself on having a well-trained, experienced staff that offers expert advice on gardening in Colorado's extreme climate.

For customers, they offer a series of 10 "Winter Workshops" in January and February, selling out every year. These workshops feature regional experts on gardening topics specifically for Northern Colorado, many focusing on water-wise landscape design and plant choices.

The nursery also offers a "newcomer" packet. Inside the folder, residents new to the area find a welcome letter, customized planting instructions, a color copy of the USDA Hardiness Zone map, a copy of the Rocky Mountain Plant Guide produced by the Colorado Nursery & Greenhouse Association, Colorado State University Extension factsheets, a coupon and an invitation to join the nursery's customer appreciation "Garden Club."

Fort Collins Nursery employs 32 people year-round, and 58 during peak season.

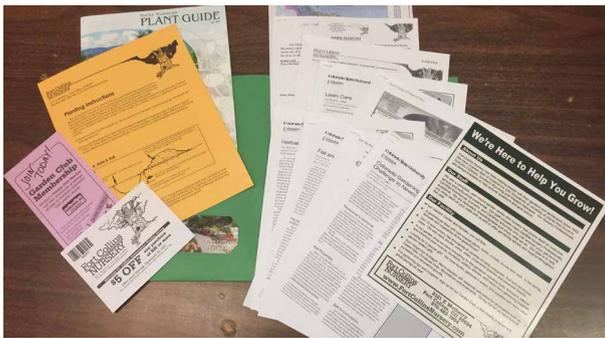




Plant Select

Twenty-one years ago, a collaboration of Colorado State University, Denver Botanic Gardens and local growers launched a regional plant introduction program. Its focus was (and still is) to find beautiful, resilient and often unknown plants for regional gardeners and the unique environmental challenges they face.

Working together to trial, produce and distribute, there are now more than 140 perennials, groundcovers, grasses, shrubs and trees in the program. Plant Select works closely with local garden centers to promote each year's winners, resulting in demand for the newest selections in addition to past winners.



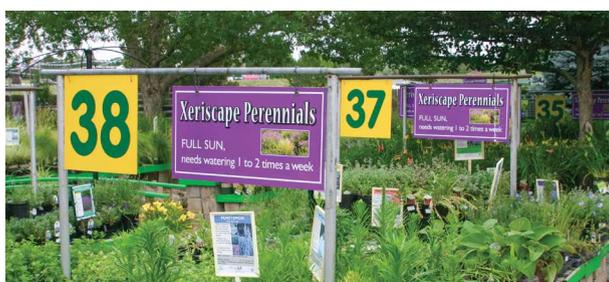
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Tagawa Gardens



One of the region's fastest growing areas is to the southeast of Denver, where Tagawa Gardens (Centennial) is situated. It's also one of the regions hardest hit when water restrictions are imposed by local governments.

Tagawa offers two large areas in which customers can shop when looking for water-wise plants. Their dedicated Plant Select perennial selection is the largest in the region, carrying nearly every plant in the program's history, including the newest and even a "sneak peek" at potential future winners.

They seek out native and adapted varieties from the best local growers — large or small — to ensure a full offering.

In another sales area, dozens of benches are filled with hundreds of No. 1 "Xeriscape Perennials," for sunny to shady gardens. Xeriscape display gardens around the perimeter of the area, filled with labeled plants, suggest landscape ideas and garden combinations.

Throughout these areas, Tagawa-branded, custom display signs are detailed and colorful, describing each plant's adaptability to Colorado's intense gardening conditions of strong sunshine, dry air and high altitude.

As the garden center is quite large, there's a separate help desk specifically for perennials in the heart of the department. Here, customers consult with staff experts, take advantage of the garden center's resource library and access Tagawa's customized kiosk plant finder.

Tagawa also offers an extensive array of classes and workshops, both in-house and through their outreach Garden Ambassador, Luan Aiken, who is a dedicated gardener and former anchor at one of Denver's largest television stations.

Perhaps the garden center's greatest strength is its experienced staff — decades of practical and professional gardening knowledge infuse the folks who return year after year, as well

as the full-time, year-round salespeople. Tagawa's payroll tops out at 140 during peak spring season, dropping to just 45 full-time, year-round staff.

Particularly important to management is that Tagawa salespeople strive for consistent messaging. Shoppers with questions are sure to receive the same dependable advice no matter to whom they're talking.



These are a few examples of three Colorado IGCs turning local gardening challenges into opportunities for sales and homeowner gardening successes. As populations boom, seasoned gardeners arrive to areas with unfamiliar conditions. As new gardeners come into garden centers, the most successful garden centers help shoppers identify local challenges, followed up with abundant resources, plants gardening experts to help gardens flourish.

While large grower-suppliers offer a wide range of popular plants, the most successful retailers also seek out smaller growers of specialty, adapted plants to set their garden centers apart from the corporate chain stores.

Experienced gardening staff and workshops and classes provide information in a variety of styles. Successful marketing of water-wise perennials must also include collaboration with local water suppliers and utilities.

In Colorado, and many parts of the West, water is our most precious resource. Rather than negatively focusing on dwindling water supplies, growers and retailers are finding new sales opportunities that are resilient to local climates and ecologically sound. **LGR**

Pat Hayward is the owner of Phytologic Horticultural Services and former executive director of Plant Select. She can be reached at phytologic@gmail.com.

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