

# SELLING TO GENERATIONS & MORE



Ask some simple questions to learn how to engage all the different customers that walk through your doors.

By Bill Calkins

It's a fascinating time in retail lawn and garden right now! We are actively selling to FOUR generations. I'm not sure if this has ever happened before — and it certainly hasn't happened with so many changing retail and consumer dynamics at play.

Think about it. As a grower, retailer or landscaper you have to consider the needs and lifestyles of millennials, Generation Xers, baby boomers and the silent generation — not to mention many subgroups, subcultures and what are currently referred to as "tribes."

I know these terms come with all sorts of debate over the age ranges, birth years and definitions, so let's not get hung up on the specifics. But I think we

can all agree that some very different groups of people are walking through the doors of retail garden centers and calling up for landscape services these days. And in order to serve them well, solve their problems and inspire them with our products, we need to approach them differently and with products and services customized to their unique needs.

For the sake of discussion, I'm going to do something dangerous and potentially controversial. I'm going to put people in buckets and paint a broad brush over the types of people to which we are trying to promote and sell our products. Basically, I'm going to generalize.

## Millennials Who Aren't Homeowners



Let's look at a group of customers commonly referred to as millennials. But in this case, millennials who have yet to buy a house.

We'll call them Nicole and Tyler. They are young, urban and very active, living downtown in a condo. Working hard and playing hard, they certainly don't consider themselves gardeners in any way, shape or form. They are super trendy and shop at the city farmers markets and locally-owned shops.

When it comes to plants, they want small-space but big-look plants to transform their balcony. Specifically, the plants that might appeal to Tyler and Nicole include showy plants with a smaller footprint, easy-care but colorful or tropical. And if they buy edibles, they've got to be healthy.

When you see these customers walk into your store, ask them about their living space, and don't assume they are shopping to fill garden beds.

A few simple questions will help you get to their specific needs and steer them toward plants that will fit their lifestyle — and, of course, your succulent and indoor plant departments.

## Eco-Friendly Customers



The next shopper I want to address isn't necessarily part of one specific generation referenced above but is certainly unique in her wants and needs. Let's call her Amy.

She leads an extremely eco-friendly and natural lifestyle. Self-sufficient and minimalist, this group of customers is all about reducing the impact they make on the Earth. From the food she eats to the furniture she buys, Amy does her research to be sure she's making the best decision to fit her mission.

Drought-tolerant plants and pollinator attractors might be right up her alley.

Help her make sense of all of your natural plant care and fertilizer products, and she'll appreciate that your store is also trying to make less of an impact. Remind her of the health and wellness benefits of plants and make sure she sees the huge pollinator display I'm sure you are planning for this year.

If you help Amy create a water-wise backyard habitat, she'll come back year after year to make it better.

You can also remind her that indoor plants clean the air in her living and work spaces. She is probably aware, but a reminder will show you understand what makes her tick.

## Those with Young Families



Now meet Sarah. Sarah is a Gen Xer with a young family at home, and with that comes a house and some space to garden.

What Sarah doesn't have is free time. She probably doesn't self identify as a gardener either, although she's learning and trying to decorate her porch, patio and garden the way she decorates her house — stylishly and sensibly. Remember, there are kids running around.

The plants that might appeal to her are big and colorful but also low maintenance and stylish. Flower-filled patio pots and baskets seem like a quick fix to brighten up the front of her house and make her smile when she pulls in the driveway.

Point Sarah in the direction of impulse color but also perennials and low-care plants for her garden beds. Your fresh vegetable plants could also be appealing because if she reads parenting blogs or magazines, there's no doubt she's been considering a raised bed or two for a veggie garden to plant with the kids.

Help her be successful with these early projects and you'll have a loyal customer for life.

And with Sarah comes her family. You might only see them on Mother's Day weekend or at the Fall Festival but whatever you can do to engage and inspire them with impulse baskets, kids' gardening classes or events will help make your store the go-to place when they need anything for the yard.

### The One Always Traveling



Someone often forgotten by garden retailers but certainly a potential customer with disposable income is Amanda, the business traveler. She's even more "on-the-go" than Nicole or Tyler but fits the role of a business traveler and weekend entertainer.

Help Amanda achieve success with easy-install and easy-care plants and combo décor. Stylish, trendy small plants and dish gardens fit her love of entertaining. If she has a yard (you'll find out if you ask!), direct her to the perennial department for the longest-blooming, lowest-maintenance plants on the bench and annuals

with big impact.

Be sure to send her home with the products and info to keep plants alive while she's away at meetings during the week.

### Recently Retired Boomers



OK. You know the next couple very well — Nancy and Mike. They are your recently retired boomers who have shopped your store for years. But the danger is assuming their lifestyle hasn't changed.

With kids grown and out of the house, now they have time to garden. Actually, the reality is they have time to travel and do all of the things they've wanted to do for the past 20 years. But the good thing is, until they downsize, there are still garden beds to fill and decks to decorate.

When they aren't traveling, they are entertaining family and friends, and they also have time to experiment with new varieties in the classes they know. Now they garden for fun, fitness and front yard appeal.

Gardening is healthy and they know it. So steer them to lawn and garden projects and ideas to make entertainment spaces even more inviting. When their families come visit, they'll be excited to show off these new spaces. And don't forget to promote anything specifically geared for the holidays, when they want their homes looking best.

### The Master Gardeners



Last but far from least is Gloria — your Master Gardener friend who spends a lot of time at the store perusing all of the plants and making careful selections. Gloria knows more than most of your staff and can be somewhat intimidating for many new team members. She's a plant finder, a versatile gardener and loves a challenge.

New and novel plants are like magnets to Gloria. My suggestion is to enlist her. Share your new varieties and sample plants with her and ask her to give feedback.

She's probably active on Facebook, so encourage her to share photos of her garden and post to your page. Invite her

to your events and partner her up with some of the younger shoppers I mentioned earlier in this article. They say "respect skips a generation" and we listen more to our grandparents than our parents.

Maybe Gloria is your secret weapon to engage the elusive "next generation" we talk so much about.

Hopefully I haven't offended anyone or made too many enemies due to my broad generalizations. I think you've seen or will see each of these shoppers coming through your door, and I hope this helps you realize that they all have different needs and consume plants differently.

If you ask some simple questions, I suspect you'll be able to learn enough to know how best to approach them and some of the plants and products that will appeal to and inspire them.

Each one can fill a cart with the products we sell, and I have no doubt you will wow them and keep them coming back for more. We sell amazing products that have relevance in all lives and lifestyles. It's just a matter of helping your customers find the right fit. **I&GR**

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- **Western Red Cedar is rot and pest resistant**
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