



Never Underestimate  
**THE POWER OF**  
a Simple Idea

The one simple question to ask that can help you make better quality sales and better sales relationships — and train yourselves to be better advocates for customers.



By Christina Salwitz

In my job as The Personal Garden Coach, I feel like I have heard it all since I opened this business — and if you add in my 20 plus years in retail garden centers, until recently I felt quite resolved about it. But of course, like so many topics we feel confident about, someone or something comes along and rocks our world to teach us that we ain't seen nothin' yet!

That's precisely what I want to discuss this month and remind all of us that we can't take any of our diligent efforts at spreading good horticultural information for granted and that there will always be that one gardener who makes you scratch your head and say to yourself "Really?"

### Information Gathering

So much of our daily interactions with customers and clients relies on us effectively "giving permission" for the gardener we're helping to do something they've always wanted to do. Like removing shrubs they have hated for 20 years, or adding an expensive collector's peony to the garden that they've always wanted because it reminds them of their departed mother.

We're also consistently called upon to be amateur detectives in the best interest of the customer, too. I used to be one of those online plant ID app people who identified as many as 50 plants per day for customers based on terrible phone photos — and I got pretty darn good at it because I learned to ask the not-so-obvious questions that others had missed and eventually given up on.



Aside from dispensing accurate scientific based guidance on the who, what, when, where and why of gardening to hopefully help them avoid the pitfalls and expensive mistakes that we've likely learned the hard way, we want them to enjoy gardening as a lifelong endeavor and not feel like a failure when hardships like weather, critters, disease or a neighbor with an overabundance of pruning eccentricity strikes out at our mutual hedge.

Our interactions frequently boil down to a simple series of defining questions that are pretty routine and predictable, such as asking about soil and sun conditions, watering strategy, maintenance level interest, etc. You are all smart and pretty much know that whole drill.

But what I would like to challenge you to try is a seemingly easy yet hard question like "How are you feeling about that choice?" Right now, your ears just perked up and you're thinking "HUH?"

This is next-level customer service psychology stuff here, and the time to practice this very type of interaction is when we're not running like chickens with our heads cut off. This technique can help you make better quality sales and better sales relationships and train yourselves to be better advocates for customers who might be very new to all of this indeed.

### Digging Deeper

When you ask a question as simple as that, take the briefest of seconds for direct eye contact (not in a creepy way) so you convey that you care about their response, then be quiet and wait. What often happens next is three basic responses: "Good," "Fine" and possibly "Ready." This is just human nature and it means you need to be ready because it might just subconsciously open them up to ideas, thoughts or questions they might not have considered before now.

Sometimes they are choosing to go with product or plant X simply because they are being told to by someone else, even if it's a well-intentioned neighbor, relative or, heaven forbid, the Google machine or PinstaGram. They may have enlightened you to the scenario for which they want product or plant X and you simply may be showing them the way to what they have asked to purchase.

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However, what if you could save them a world of hurt, worry, anger, resentment or even embarrassment by delving just a tad deeper into their needs and make certain they are choosing something that's going to fit in with their goals?

I'll use a customer purchasing fruit trees as one example; the customer comes to the garden center because they just bought their first home and they have fond memories about Grandpa's famous apple trees from childhood. Grandma made incredible treats with those apples, they were stalwart friends for climbing, and now the customer wants to recreate those happy childhood memories for their own young children. So, we dutifully lead them to the fresh grove of apple trees, impart them with information on cross-pollinators, types of fruits, a handout on planting and voila! You've now gotten them excited about buying their first fruit tree for the eventual mini orchard they envision in their mind's eye.

If we had asked them before completing the purchase how they felt about their choice, in their zeal we might have learned that they are SO excited about their purchase because of how low maintenance these fruit trees are. Wait, WHAT?! We might have also found out that they live in a neighborhood of new suburban construction homes with 10-ft property setbacks and rodent problems. Not to mention that their maintenance crew of untrained "mow and blow" people will be responsible for care while they work 80 hours a week at their high-tech stress minefield jobs. Redirect purchase, STAT please!

Or how about a recent example of someone who thought they bought the über trendy houseplant *Monstera adansonii* or "Swiss Cheese Plant" when they actually bought a common pothos vine and proceeded to spend an entire year painstakingly cutting holes in each individual leaf because they thought that was how the holes got there. Think of the embarrassment we could have saved that poor new gardener if someone had only delved slightly deeper on that purchase.

Of course, I realize that we're not always going to have the time to ask these questions, but I just want you to at least think about how much aggravation, bad returns and bad reviews could be avoided by simply taking our questions to the next logical step. We were all newbie gardeners once and we all have to make our own learning mistakes over time. It just seems to me that in this age of really bad, misleading and even costly information out there from well intentioned "experts," box stores who don't really care about accuracy or customer advocacy for that matter and internet research down rabbit holes of "just throw some Epsom salts on it" and those who deny any rational science efficacy period, we could take a moment on behalf of them to be their advocate even if they don't know it. 🌙

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