

Selling More Pots & Planters

By John Hanesworth

Differentiate your store by offering quality, out-of-the-ordinary products.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has reported a growth surge in the garden center industry since early March, likely due to travel restrictions throughout the country. Garden centers are often exempted from local closure orders, and interest among customers new to gardening and plant parenting is likely to grow as people stay closer to home in the future.

Concurrently, thanks to Instagram and other online photo sharing platforms, a huge new population of customers, both millennials and Gen Xers, is embracing house plant growing as a hobby and for home décor. A recent Google search for "indoor jungle" produced over 67 million results — underscoring that this trend is the real thing.

Together, these developments present new market opportunities for independent garden centers (IGCs) and retailers. Translating them into revenue requires an understanding of the drivers behind customer purchasing decisions and marshalling business expertise to meet the market potential.

Millennials and Gen Xers Are Discovering Small Plants

IGCs don't have to view as competition the recent proliferation of online sites selling mostly small house plants and planters. In fact, this online activity is inspiring a new generation of plant lovers — who also embrace expertise and experience and want to support brick-and-mortar stores that support their communities.

We have seen this phenomenon up close. Developed organically over 13 years, our business model is built around the unusual combination of a retail home and garden décor store and a wholesale company. Small planters and garden décor are bestsellers in our San Antonio, Texas, retail store, and they are represented in our carefully curated wholesale line available across the U.S.

Our Terra Fina small planter collection comprises handcrafted hanging and table-top homes for popular succulents, small tropicals, and orchids. Because of the popularity of this product line, we have added new styles since its launch in 2018. At the Tropical Plant International Expo in January, garden center buyers who dropped by our booth said these terra cotta planters exemplify what they are looking for to keep up with the demand for small planters.

While today's younger customers may focus on small plants and planters, we have found that these customers also will grow their newfound passion to encompass larger plants and feature pots. As they purchase homes, their interest may well evolve into a need for landscape plants. For IGCs, that means stepping into the hot market for small planters today and leveraging it as a springboard to cultivate the long-term customer of tomorrow.

Differentiation Through Out-of-the-Ordinary Products

No company can be all things to all customers. We have developed a niche in San Antonio and South Texas that



SALES TIPS FOR RETAIL STORES

- Provide customers with out-of-the-ordinary options that they cannot price shop at the big box stores or at your local competitor's.
- Phase out plastic and mass-produced planters; these options can devalue your fine plants and planter selection.
- Choose unusual, high-quality options in small planters. Become more creative in your outdoor décor buying!
- The millennial customer is often a homeowner, or soon will be. Cultivate the relationship!
- Provide customers with solid advice: Choose the best quality planter your budget allows today.

stays true to our values as the regional source for high-quality and unusual, hand-made and sustainable fair-trade home and garden décor. We therefore consciously decided to forego selling plastic or mass-produced planters or other synthetic products.

With our frequent travels to Thailand and Bali, where many garden design trends originate, we stay ahead of the design curve, offering soon-to-trend products ahead of the mass market. We also offer handmade, yet lower cost, ceramic planters to encourage those retail customers who might otherwise choose plastic planters as the most economical choice.

Millennials and Gen Xers are helping to drive that growth. Sustainable production has been a priority for many of these customers, who are often willing to pay a premium for handcrafted, eco-friendly products. For example, we tell our customers that our high-quality ceramic planters from Thailand and Vietnam can last a lifetime, and that their natural, organic beauty is a healthy complement to the plant.

Our experience tells us that for selective customers, dependable sources for out-of-the-ordinary, high-quality planters that contrast with offerings at big-box stores, are essential. When customers see the same or similar mass-market planters at IGC competitors, their purchase decision can become all about price. This race to the bottom hurts the IGC industry. So, consider positioning your IGC as the local source of inspiration for customers' plant parent needs. Set yourself apart from your competitors!

Promote Your Expertise

Shoppers interested in buying a garden product online are likely to find and consult detailed descriptions that will influence their purchasing decision. The equivalent in an in-store environment is a well-informed, well-trained garden center staff.

At Big Grass, we provide detailed product descriptions online, but we pride ourselves as gentle in-person educators and influencers.

As we have developed and nurtured direct relationships over the years with small artisan producers in Thailand,

Bali and Vietnam, market and popular design trends have come to us. We enjoy sharing with all who are interested in information about production techniques, cultural traditions, design inspiration and materials.

Our best and most loyal wholesale and retail customers appreciate the level of knowledge and love we bring to what we do. That is why, for our wholesale clients, we provide product details and talking points for staff training to enhance their sales conversations and foster customer loyalty.

For the inexperienced shopper, selecting the right plant and the perfect planter can be a Goldilocks dilemma. Plant variety and size, growing conditions, personal preferences and care requirements all influence the choice of indoor and outdoor plants. With their expert advice and passion, garden center staff can guide customers to the best plant and planter combinations. Sales staff should know and share with customers how planters are made — even a ceramic planter can have a story!

And keep in mind that a great experience will move customers to post photos and online reviews that market your community-based garden stores — and at no cost to you.

Seize the Market

Now is as good a time as ever to rethink your planter and garden décor selection, especially if it overlaps with your competitors'. Think about showcasing more variety outside of the product lines offered by most large distributors. Choose unusual, high-quality options in small planters. Become more creative in your outdoor décor buying. And tell your company's story and that of each product you sell.

These tactics, along with a good selection of smaller planters for the growing demographic of customers new to gardening and plant care, will create excitement in your business. While times are challenging, we can all create or fortify our niche in the market — and emerge stronger than before. 🌱

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