



# Product and Merchandising Trends

## in a Post-Pandemic World

By Michael Bodo

**T**he COVID-19 virus has not only transformed the way we live, but its lingering effects could forever change how consumers shop for goods and services and what they deem valuable. While the transition from shopping exclusively at brick and mortar retailers to online has steadily taken place over the past two decades, the pandemic served to accelerate its prominence among consumers.

The impact and toll this has taken on legacy retail has been nothing short of stunning, with bankruptcy announcements from once stalwart companies occurring seemingly daily. One segment that has benefited from this shift, however, are hardware stores, nurseries and retail garden centers.

This trend had been developing years prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, but was expedited following the shutdown of many state economies where these businesses were deemed “essential” to the communities they serve. As a consequence of this designation, they could remain open while many competing stores were forced to temporarily close. While this brought with it many changes and restrictions to how customers shopped their establishments, it also produced an outpouring of support from both new and existing customers.

### Rediscovering the Joys of Gardening

Independent garden centers are reaping the rewards of this good will and are selling live plants, herbs, vegetable seeds, organic fertilizers and soils at record rates and are turning a whole new generation of consumers on to the joys and benefits of gardening.

Decorative hardgoods and outdoor living products have participated in this boom with the trend of extending the comforts of one’s home to their exterior living spaces. Vacations have once again been replaced with “staycations,” with consumers spending more time than ever working in their yards and entertaining outdoors.

The move to organics and eco-friendly products that began well over a decade ago has solidly taken root with millennial shoppers. This ethos extends beyond plant material, fertilizer and pest control, as consumers from all demographics seek products to accentuate their landscape settings manufactured

from sustainable and biodegradable materials. Decorative outdoor accents produced from natural elements such as glass, ceramic, metal, wood, concrete and stone are highly sought after, while those produced by artificial means are avoided.

### Merchandising Décor Products

The question we routinely get from retailers is, “How do I merchandise this?” This was a challenge prior to COVID-19 and has been made more difficult in the era of social distancing and touch-point reduction.

Given the current environment we are in, it is important for retailers to have product that is packaged out of harm’s way, yet have it be visually appealing and communicate a message to the shopper in a glance.

Creating vignettes that romance outdoor decor products — both inside the garden center and outside — is more important than ever. Displaying product out of the box inside the store is crucial, as it gives customers a visual impression of how an item will look in their landscape or yard. If you’re selling garden stakes, wind spinners, statuary, gazing globes and stands, create a faux landscape setting with an assortment of product from those categories displayed assembled with packaged product nearby or in a stock room that an associate can easily grab and give to the customer to reduce the occurrence of touching.

Obviously, you can’t have retail packaged product outside unless the materials used are waterproof and UV protected. What you can do to create curb appeal, however, is produce virtual homescapes featuring items displayed out of the box with large waterproof hangtags containing clearly visible SKU numbers and scannable UPC barcodes to make it easy for associates to identify and pull packaged inventory from inside the store to present to the customer. This harkens to the time-tested sales motto of “One to show. One to go.”

Although among today’s fastest-growing categories, solar lighting products are arguably the biggest merchandising challenge independent garden centers face. If the packaging or point-of-sales materials included with the product don’t effectively communicate what it does or how it looks illuminated, it becomes a tough sell.

From a supplier standpoint, this has always been our most difficult challenge, as often there isn't enough real estate for eye-catching graphics to help tell the story and you are left to hope the consumer knows from experience what the item is and does.

Typically, independent retailers that do big business in solar lighting are those who create a dark area or space in their store to demonstrate the lighting effect of the products they carry. It's the sizzle that sells the steak, as we like to say. If done properly, the volume potential and return is phenomenal!

### Decorative Products for Outdoor Entertainment

As a supplier of environmentally friendly and sustainably produced decorative garden products for nearly 40 years, Echo Valley is uniquely positioned to take advantage of this shift in consumer buying habits. Nowhere is this more evident than the products being introduced for the 2021 season.

We are returning to our hand-blown glass roots in a big way and are delving deeper with our offering of art glass accents for the home, yard and garden. Many of the soon-to-be-released items feature our new multicolor, translucent Aurora glass, which is unlike anything previously seen in the market. Nearly all these designs incorporate a captivating solar lighting feature making them equally enjoyable at night.

To meet consumer demand for sustainably produced, eco-friendly outdoor lighting products, we are expanding our popular Lumisphere (natural fiber) lantern line to include a collection

of burnished wicker pendants that are similarly rustic to our rattan series, yet are even more stunning and beautiful at night! Our Edi-Sol lanterns have added several models touching upon vintage, contemporary and steampunk (industrial) themes. The new styles are a welcome departure from anything we've previously done and nicely round out the current range.

With the growth in outdoor entertaining, our EchoFlame accent fireplace and accessories line has the most untapped potential of all our product categories. Introduced last year, the response from retailers and consumers has been extremely positive. Independent garden centers were first to embrace the product and they've been rewarded for their trust in the form of strong sell-throughs and repeat purchases of our certified-safe, EchoFlame gel fuel. We are looking to grow and expand the line by introducing three distinct glazed ceramic appliances to our current collection, in addition to a gothic, multi-section steel torch that is available for purchase now.

To be successful in the post-pandemic retail marketplace requires manufacturers and retailers to cater to the expectations of the current generation of consumers who are looking to be part of something larger than themselves and feel vested in the businesses they support. Companies selling compelling, environmentally friendly and sustainably produced products that address the needs of these shoppers stand to be the biggest winners. 🌿

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