



WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG, BAD, CUSTOM CONTAINER DESIGN CLIENT?

Abundant container design sales are a key tool in your sales arsenal.



By Christina Salwitz

Why are we SO timid about charging people for our hard work? When it comes to custom container designs, it seems that garden centers often insist on getting in their own way on this topic, so I'll let you in a little secret that those "in the know" rely on every year: Any customer who inquires about custom container gardens is NOT looking for nor expecting a "deal."

You are not price gouging anyone; you are not trying to nickel and dime someone to death. Every season on combo pots, you are simply the convenient way for them to get a designer look and skilled planting, as opposed to box store containers bought from an assembly line operation that, while very nice, can be found on every third doorstep. Your garden center is unique, your customer demographic is unique and your geographic location is unique. No one has a better opportunity to capitalize on your specific customers than you.

And if you find resistance to your price quote, politely refocus the conversation over to the ready-made combos you have already completed by your custom design staff. Ironically, they should be about the same pricing as the

completed quote for the customer in front of you; they're just ready for "grab and go" purchases.

No other category in the independent garden center covers more opportunity for sales — and, more importantly — repeat sales than containers. So, understanding why abundant container design sales are a key tool in your sales arsenal is important to be competitive in the face of fierce competition for a customer's attention, dollars and loyalty.

What Customers Want

What are customers EAGER to get from us when we sell them GREAT containers?

1. They want confirmation that they have made GREAT plant choices.
2. They want to understand HOW they can get better at choosing, designing, maintaining, etc.
3. They want to be ENTERTAINED with fresh and creative ideas they can't get at box stores!
4. They want to know more about YOU and feel like they can count on you for great guidance.
5. They want the privilege of being able to tell their friends they bought CUSTOM from YOU, allow them!!

When you sell a container (let's say an empty one) most of the time, you are going to at least try to sell with it:

1. Potting soil.
2. Fertilizer.
3. Plants, of course!
4. Maybe some kind of container insert for the pot like an “Ups-A-Daisy”, DrainIt! or Drain-Smart Disc.
5. Pot feet.
6. Maybe rock or some kind of mulch to dress the top up if soil can be seen.
7. Garden art to go in the container as a design element.
Glass? Metal? Wood? Miniatures?

Yet I am ever mystified as to why garden centers try to make it such a dry and complicated transaction when it should be SUPER fun! How many of us in our daily life get to customize such things regularly? Your car? Not likely. Your furniture? Maybe once in a while.

Putting a Price on Inspiration

But on such an overall low-ticket item that only brings happiness for a short period of time? Other than ordering food, it's a rarity! Why are we making it a dry and mathematical equation standing at the counter adding up the cost of soil by the scoop? Or, just as bad, pricing your designs by the inch diameter of the pot and listing it on a sheet above the potting table? Talk about a downer!

Pricing has many facets and MORE than just slapping a price on it and walking away. We are in the business of selling the customer inspiration. Making a great return on the container category means more than just the numbers you see when the container empty or planted goes through the checkout.

You must be able to understand how all of the dollars earned from ALL of the parts of the container sale come together to be able to fully appreciate that pricing isn't just about the price. Just don't get too mired in it and lose all the sex appeal of that exciting sale. Because believe me, the customer is just tickled and can't wait to get their “specially planted just for them design” home. So, let's make an effort to make them feel special about giving us their money, too!

If your customer comes in and sees your display of containers with all of the fixins and then the planted-up containers and they buy one of the pots empty, they may also buy a few of the display plants and then springboard to others on your tables and create their own designs. Still a huge win! The next step is to help that customer understand that now that they have bought the “room” (container) for their plants, how “we would LOVE to help them choose seasonal furniture to change it out regularly.”

Getting Creative

Fortune favors the bold, and it's no different in garden center sales. What if you also offered this customer the option to pre-purchase a subscription for “slipper pots” that can be slipped into their container two to three times per year? Each season can be based on a “fresh sheet” that the grower plans ahead with the buyer for some specialty or pre-booked plants. But what about potting up larger items like shrubs and trees?

Containers with exciting new ideas encourage customer experimentation, too. As long as you can access enough stock at any one time to make enough of those pots to have an impactful show, you can mix it up, get more creative, and make higher-dollar value sales.

How about saying, “I understand that you have been working on upgrading bits and pieces of your landscape over time. Have you considered buying trees, shrubs and perennials to go in your containers for a season or two before transplanting them into the landscape? It's a wonderful way to extend your gardening dollars. The bonus is that you get fun containers where we just add in a few annuals, so you throw away fewer plants. It saves you quite a bit of money.”



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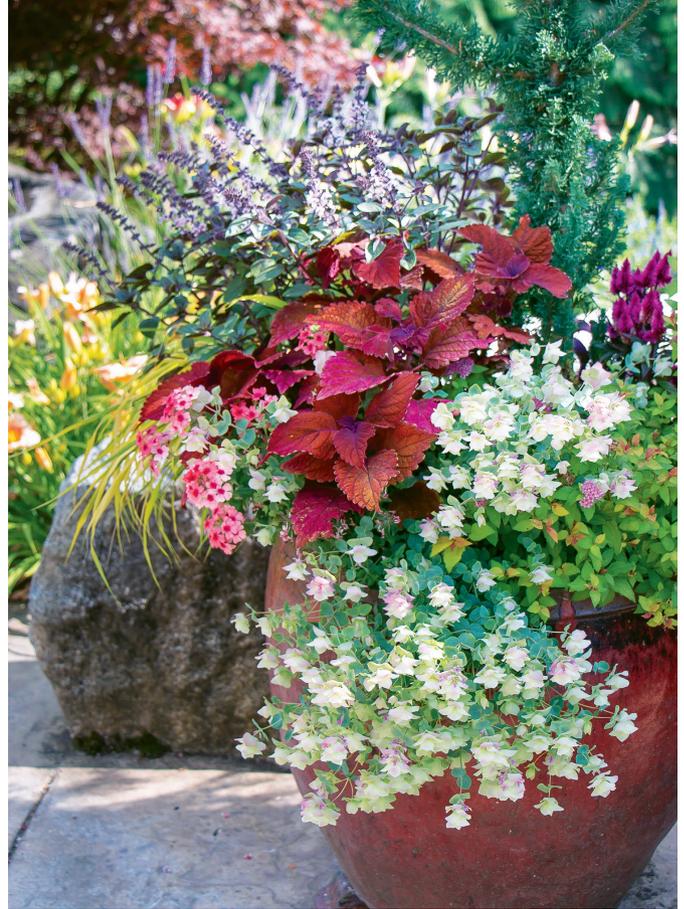


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There are customers wanting MUCH more than yet another petunia combo, and I find it fascinating how little exposure many garden centers give to allowing a wide variety of plants to star in combination containers. What's the worst that can happen? It gets taken apart and re-potted again later? By taking some small incremental risks and using out of the ordinary plants in your combinations, you will not only be able to ask for higher prices on even the smallest combos, but if it doesn't sell, you may still make numerous sales on all of the ingredients!

Make it a Team Effort

At this point, you also have to ask yourself if everyone from the manager, buyer, salesperson, cashier and everyone in between, including the person loading up cars, is trained to ask if anything from the above list is missing before they leave the parking lot. I know garden centers whose cashiers are masterful at this to say the least, but it can extend so much further in its reach if you truly think about it.

By thinking globally about how the buyer, merchandiser, grower and everyone in between interacts with the container design customer, you have just increased your opportunity to sell more container designs by a fair amount as opposed to just putting a few pretty pots out, crossing your fingers that they are priced right and hoping they sell.

Chew on this for next spring; better yet go forth and be timid no more this fall! 🍷

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