



# CONSIDERING E-COMMERCE?

Here are some tips and advice for how to make e-commerce work for your business.

By Liz Hughes

**A**re you considering e-commerce for your plant business? For many growers and retailers, website construction and maintenance is a daunting task, let alone the tedious management of an e-commerce platform. I thought I would share some of what I've learned about e-commerce to help guide others in their decision-making process.

Over the past six years I have built, implemented and managed a successful website to sell plants online. I have learned how to best represent products, ship live plants and manage inventory. Groovy Plants Ranch is a full-service garden center in central Ohio known for our large selection of harder-to-find plants; we are especially known for our excellent selection of perennials, houseplants and succulents. Our site, [www.groovyplantsranch.com](http://www.groovyplantsranch.com), sells plants for seasonal pre-orders and curbside pickup, and we ship plants to customers in all 50 states.

## In-House Advantage

When we started [www.groovyplantsranch.com](http://www.groovyplantsranch.com) in 2015, we decided to keep all website building and management in-house, which has proven to be an excellent decision. When major changes need to be made, we are able to do it in a timely fashion instead of requesting that someone in an off-site office adds our task to the bottom of their to-do list. We also like that the person managing our website is part of our team. We feel that it helps share our story and translates Groovy Plants Ranch to the web more authentically.

Our website keystone is excellent photography. There is always a push and pull between taking a picture of the best plant in a crop and making sure it is representative of

what a customer will receive when shipped. A picture of the biggest, most beautiful hanging basket in perfect condition is for marketing and social media. The product listing needs to be the best-looking medium-sized plant from a crop. Online customers are very discerning and have let us know if they think a picture is not a good representation of what they've received. We would rather have a customer be blown away by how big the plant is than be upset because the plant they received is slightly smaller than the one shown in the product listing.

## Managing Packaging, Shipping and Inventory

Shipping live plants is not an easy task, but after several iterations of packaging we have landed on the best packaging for us. A video of our packaging can be found on our YouTube channel: [youtube.com/groovyplantsranch](https://youtube.com/groovyplantsranch). Packaging a plant takes time and extra supplies. When pricing our plants for our website we include the cost of packaging into the equation. As a result, we charge on average \$2 more per plant online than we do in store for plants that are shippable. Shipping plants in the winter requires a heat pack. We are shipping from Ohio and require all orders to have a heat pack if the temperature in Ohio is 35° F or lower.

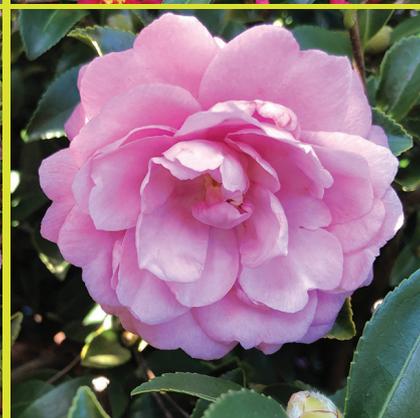
Shipping plants across state lines has a lot of red tape, and we work closely with our APHIS USDA agent to make sure we are in compliance with all relevant state laws. Many of the laws are written with large wholesale shipments in mind and are hard to navigate when shipping a box of two plants to a consumer. I have talked with plenty of confused APHIS agents over the past few years. The laws in every state are different for exporting plants over state lines.

# Fall is For... October Magic® Camellias!

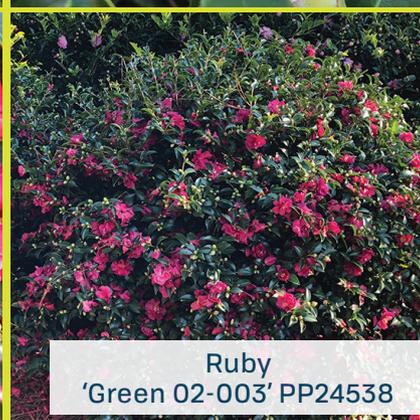
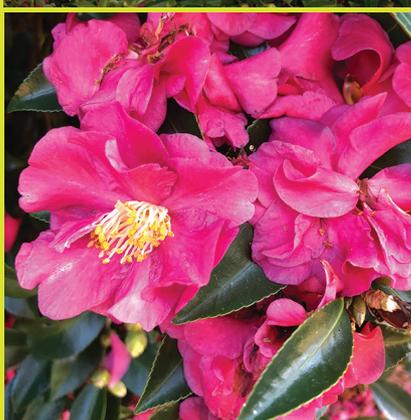
- ✿ Fall flowering *C. sasanqua* selections
- ✿ Great size for foundation plantings
- ✿ Lovely planted in big sweeps or as a specimen
- ✿ Perfect for residential & commercial landscapes



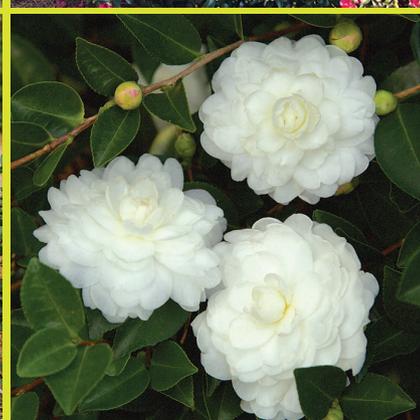
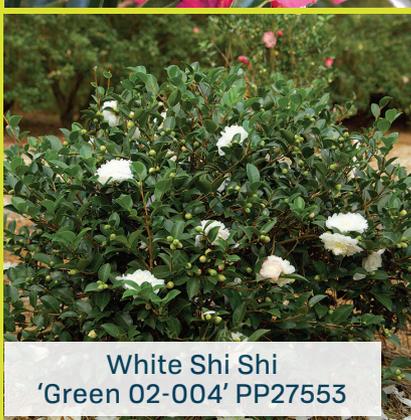
Crimson N' Clover  
'Green 08-052' PP30386



Pink Perplexion  
'Green 02-019' PP27334



Ruby  
'Green 02-003' PP24538



White Shi Shi  
'Green 02-004' PP27553

Available exclusively through  
the Southern Living® and  
Sunset Plants® Collections

Inventory management continues to be a point of difficulty for us because we are a smaller operation and don't have space to hold a completely separate online inventory. What works best for us is being vigilant about crop numbers and making adjustments to online availability in real time. Our plant pullers have the management app on their phones and make any adjustments that need to be made as they go.

We do not offer shipping for every plant that we sell. The decision to list a plant is based on plant size (is it affordable to ship?), the plant's hardiness (how will it look after five to seven days in a dark box without water and will it be OK if kicked across a mail room?), and USDA regulations. We are currently shipping houseplants and succulents; we are hoping to expand our offering to perennials in 2022.

One of the biggest things I have noticed about an e-commerce store is how the amount of time put into it directly impacts the return. In the fall of 2020, we brought on a fulltime e-commerce manager, which has allowed our website and marketing program to grow in a way that I, as the owner, did not have the time to dedicate. In previous years the website, along with everything else, has been put on hold during spring as I simply did not have time for anything besides spring retail. This year, our e-commerce manager was able to continue to upload new products, manage orders, and communicate with customers online throughout our busiest weeks.

For Groovy Plants Ranch, having an e-commerce store has been a great addition to our business. It is used by our local customers to learn about our offerings, as well as customers on the other side of the country. It is a steady revenue stream throughout the year, including the off season. We expect it to grow as consumers become accustomed to purchasing everything online.

### Advice for Getting Started (Or Beefing Up What You Have)

If you are thinking about starting e-commerce or majorly upgrading your website, my biggest advice is don't wait! Starting a website can be a daunting task and thinking about the big picture can make it hard to even start. However, do-it-yourself websites are ubiquitous and quick to set up — just find an afternoon and get started.

Having a modern looking website that is easy to navigate, and works on mobile is essential and can quickly add to your bottom line. Your digital footprint doesn't need to be perfect right away, but having a website that sells gift cards, a few items for pickup, or event registrations can add value to your customers' experience before they visit your store.

When choosing a platform for your e-commerce store, consider if you want it to integrate with your POS. We sell a lot of gift cards on our website that are purchased to be used in store, and the two stores working together is



Photo by Ashley Wallace Photography

important. Also, think about what your plan is for the online store. Do you want it for selling items for pickup, or items to be shipped? Some platforms are better for different kinds of selling. When choosing a platform, I spent some time building quick free trial stores on several platforms. This practice helped me get a feel for how each one worked, their ease of use on the backend, and the customer experience.

One important thing to understand about selling plants and goods online is that the profit margins are often much lower than in-store shopping. The process of picking, organizing, packaging and shipping plants is costly, and you may feel it simply isn't worth the effort. Having slightly higher prices online is a good way to buffer this, and ironing out your efficiencies is key.

Before you pull the plug on the idea, consider this: is e-commerce going anywhere anytime soon? Figuring out how to make ecommerce work for your business now, could/should pay dividends in the future as demand for online sales continues to grow.

Lastly, if you are interested in selling plants to be shipped, think about putting in some consumer-sized orders from stores that are doing what you hope to. See how their plants arrive, what the packaging looks like, and how long it takes to process the order. We periodically order plants from big online plant sellers to see what their packaging and plant quality look like. Doing this initially helped us come up with our packaging system and it let us know where the bar was set for plant size and quality. We continue to order from places like this occasionally to see what changes they have made to their packaging that we might want to adopt.

When we started shipping plants six years ago, we were excited when we had 10 orders in the same week. We were using generic unmarked boxes, packing our plants was inefficient and we delivered boxes by hand to the post office. We have worked our way up to having custom-printed boxes, full-color care cards, and a packing system that works for most of our plants. Don't get hung up on having everything perfect right away; just get started. You can do it! 🌿

**Liz Hughes is co-owner of Groovy Plants Ranch. She can be reached at [groovyplantsranch@gmail.com](mailto:groovyplantsranch@gmail.com). She is also a member of GPN's 40 Under 40 Class of 2021.**