

PUBLISHING SUCCESS

Today, garden centers can easily collect and send targeted educational materials to a publisher to generate highly customized print or digital content.

By Jean Ann Van Krevelen

This past year saw significant changes in the publishing world. And while large bookstores are struggling to stay afloat, sales are thriving for businesses that have books as a part of a broader collection of merchandise. Today's garden centers are perfectly positioned to take advantage of this trend by providing their customers with the books they need to garden successfully.

This return to specialized or niche businesses reflects the cultural phenomena found on many social networking sites. Network members aggregate in topical communities created around shared interests, developing relationships and trust and look to these connections for recommendations and advice. On Twitter, this is reflected in the list feature, which allows users to sort their friends into various categories. Facebook has similar functions

in the creation of fan pages and groups.

Of course, connecting with others who have similar interests is something people have done for centuries. Ironically, it is information technology that negatively impacted community-building efforts. By giving information greater reach and accessibility, people grew less reliant on neighbors and friends for communications and recommendations.

Today, anyone can (and does) produce volumes of information via blogs, social media sites and websites. As a consequence, the information flow has become unmanageable for most, resulting in a return to the previous community-based communication model. But in this incarnation, communities are no longer formed to ensure each person has access to as much information as possible. Rather, these new groups serve as filters by sifting through



the deluge and returning with content that is reliable and relevant. Fortunately, this is something that garden centers have provided their customers for years via product selection and education.

Garden centers currently have several features that can boost the sales of targeted educational materials. By leveraging long-standing customer and vendor relationships, specialized gardening knowledge and expert status, data can be easily collected and sent to a publisher to generate highly customized print or digital content.

Some of the new ways that garden publishers and garden centers are reaching consumers include:

- Highly engaging and timely blogging
- Connectivity and content sharing on Facebook
- Cross-promotion of product/events on Twitter
- Widgets with customized content, easy plugins for websites
- New gardening applications for iPhones and Android phones
- Cross promotion in e-newsletters and e-mail blasts
- Partnering on video shoots and production
- In-store author education series (see "Hard Copy" sidebar)

As publishers add digital content provision as a service, garden centers can easily and affordably reach hundreds and thousands of customers on a daily basis via blog posts, social media posts, photos, videos, podcasts and e-books. Since this content lives in the virtual world, there is no real world inventory to be managed and no store space needed.

Incorporating garden books and digital content makes sense both as an educational tool and as a means for increasing value. By partnering with a knowledgeable publisher, garden centers can offer highly customized solutions in an affordable way. And by venturing into the new age of digital content, retailers can distinguish themselves from the competition through timely, relevant information. 🌿

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HARD COPY

While digital information is all the rage, Theresa Riley, co-owner of Florida's Rockledge Gardens, is a firm believer books are still a necessary offering at the garden center.

"I do think that garden centers should carry gardening books, though they need to be very selective, making sure that the info is area appropriate," Riley says. "I also think there should be a designated book section that is complemented by books at the counter. The key is to have the right mix of books and not too many titles. Books written by local or state recognizable personalities are a real plus!"

Here are a few reasons why Rockledge Gardens has had success with its book department:

1) Book reviews in the weekly e-mail. "I've done this twice now, and would like to get into more of a routine, like once a month," Riley says. "We'll feature a book we sell, do a short review of it and maybe do a little excerpt. I shared a recipe from the square foot gardening book one time."

2) Host a book signing. "We are very fortunate that Robert Bowden, executive director of Leu Gardens in Orlando, is a friend of ours and has become a celebrity at our garden center," she says. "He has worked on several books. When his *Guide to Growing Fruits and Vegetables in Florida* came out, we had him come in and do a presentation and sign his book. The PR person from Cool Springs Press (the book's publishing company) contacted our local paper and a reporter from



This is Rockledge Gardens' reading nook. The table was purchased at a thrift store for "practically nothing," co-owner Theresa Riley says. The retailer tries to keep one of each title open for viewing and then the rest protected with shrink wrap.

the paper interviewed Robert and wrote an article, which mentioned our book signing.

"We had over 100 people show up for the event and we sold 100 books in one weekend. We have a second event scheduled for the first Saturday in December. He has just authored a book about Leu Gardens that is due to be printed in November. I think we will be the premier event for the book. We feel that it will be a great gift for the holidays."

3) Use as an impulse sale. "Lately we have been featuring timely books at our register," Riley says. "For instance, we are in the height of our fall veggie season, so have the Bowden book, along with *Square Foot Gardening* and *Grocery Gardening* at the check out. We have been selling a good number of them.

"We need to put a sign at the register indicating where our other books are, though, to draw people back to our bookstore."