

creating & feeding the passion

Looking back on your first gardening successes can go a long way when it comes helping your customers with theirs.

By Ashton Ritchie

During my 40 years in the gardening industry, some of my most enjoyable memories come when I get to see someone catch the gardening passion.

This vision of creating passionate gardeners should drive us each day. If we had to put our strategy down on paper, it would probably be something like: Education builds confidence. Confidence builds gardening success. Success builds passion.

Think back to your first gardening success. You gained your confidence as you learned how to garden. Maybe it was a parent teaching you how to grow a radish patch, pull weeds in the vegetable garden, or how to use a lawn spreader (raise your hand if this seemed like forced labor at the time). Maybe it was your first “hands-on garden center job” where a mentor taught you everything they knew. Or, maybe it was creating a landscape around your first home. Knowledge helped build your confidence, which then helped build your success rate and excitement. Then as your passion grew, you wanted to share your gardening passion with others.

The key driver to getting folks started toward finding their gardening passion is to KEEP IT SIMPLE. Selling projects that are easy to do and recommending can't-fail products and plants will result in feedback like: “That stuff you sold me last spring really worked great, you should drop by my house to see my results. I already have some ideas for my next gardening project.”

I made my career at Scotts Miracle-Gro because our business is built around educating consumers, while providing them easy to use and understand products. But before you start thinking, “There goes the Scotts guy trying to slip us a sell message about his products,” please allow me to explain because I think you may find insight into my observations about garden retailing.

Philosophy Solidified

My first job out of college was with the Extension Service. Some days I felt like we were confusing consumers more than we were helping them. I experienced an attitude shift with my first Scotts job in the early 70s as an instructor with the Scotts Training Institute. For the first time I

really felt like I was making a difference. Retailers attending our training sessions told us that we were really helping them to better help their customers. Then during my years in Scotts marketing, my “keep it simple” philosophy solidified.

I saw first-hand the R&D that goes into formulating and testing our products before they arrive on store shelves. Yet, sometimes the package directions were confusing. Lawn spreaders were hard to use. Solutions were sold as concentrates that required extra steps and opportunities for failure. I have seen the shift to garden products that are easier to use and understand, provide consumers with an almost can't fail result and are safer for our environment.

Yet, I feel today's simpler, can't fail products and plants are not enough to create the next generation of passionate gardeners. I believe garden retailers who adopt the “education builds confidence ... confidence builds success ... success builds passion” approach will always be the model for others to aspire.

Success From Strategy

Here are three strategies I have observed over the years that you can build upon:

Educate your sales associates. This means a total education strategy that begins with hiring. Hire nice people with pleasing personalities, not because they know gardening, but because they *want* to know gardening. Team them with a mentor that understands their responsibility to pass along a gardening passion to this new sales associate. Conduct weekly, short sales meetings that create the kind of enthusiastic, educational atmosphere that will delight your customers. Give your sales associates products to try in their own lawn and garden so they know and are comfortable with what they sell. Give them access to weekly podcasts of the radio garden shows your customers listen to.

Copy ideas from other retailers that help drive repeat customer visits. Copy successful grocery, restaurant, electronic, wine, mass merchant and other retailers. To build customer traffic to experience your garden center, determine what item large numbers of customers absolutely will need during each month and aggressively promote and merchandise that item.

Make your staff aware of your keep-gardening-simple philosophy. This not only helps your team understand what you expect of them, but helps to provide a consistent customer experience. If your sales associates are always looking for opportunities to provide simple tips, they will hear the occasional “Oh thanks, I did not know that” response. If your sales associates are always looking for the opportunity to suggest an additional product that will help assure gardening success, they could hear “Thanks, you saved me a trip back to the store.” Create easy-to-do garden project displays that help your sales associates demonstrate to your customers what they can achieve in their own space. Your sales associates should always strive to not dazzle your customers with their knowledge, but to help them with the information they would need to know as if they were a first-time gardener. 🌻



Ashton Ritchie has been an authority in the lawn care industry for more than 30 years. As the resident lawn care expert at The Scotts Company, he has worked with Scotts lawn counselors to provide more than one million people with expert advice annually.

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