

Winter Gardening



By Shannon Kuhrt

Decades ago, when I first started working in this industry at M&M Wintergreens — a wholesale company providing fresh-cut greenery — Christmas decorating didn't really start until after Thanksgiving and it was only three or four weeks long. Our price list at that time was only a couple of pages and it included all the basics a retailer would need to have a successful selling season.

Today, Christmas isn't just a holiday, it's an entire season. It has consumed Thanksgiving, reaches into October as much as it feasibly can and stretches long into the New Year. What once was only three or four weeks of a decorating season is now three or four months. Our little two or three page price list now numbers over 30 pages.

Essentially, "Christmas" decorating has become "winter gardening" and with that trend change comes tremendous opportunity.

How do I know this? Well, our company *only* does this one season. I live and breathe Christmas for 365 days a year. Not to mention, I'm an information junkie and spend countless hours paying attention to what the horticulture industry does all year long as well as how other industries market the Christmas season. All of it fascinates me.

I have learned a lot just by paying attention, and I am excited to share a few of these findings with you.

1. The consumer is hungry for winter outdoor living. Now I don't mean they are going to huddle up on their patio set while wearing parkas. What I do mean is that the horticulture industry has done such a fabulous job of showing and selling gardens as outdoor extensions of their indoor style that they are clamoring for a winter version of this.

Last summer, I launched a Pinterest site for our company (www.pinterest.com/mmwintergreens). I loved pinning ideas from around the Web, showcasing the use of fresh greens in all sorts of outdoor eye-candy ways. What I wasn't expecting was the response I got, especially on winter porch pots. In what seemed almost overnight, my email inbox was exploding with notifications of re-pin after re-pin.

My point is, the consumer is hungry for these types of decorating options. Winter greenery in hanging baskets and winter porch pots with decorative branches add visual interest and color contrast to an otherwise drab winter landscape. Best of all, with the colder outdoor temperatures in many areas, these products will stay fresh until the consumer is ready to clean up their yard for spring. The need for these items is there. How are you as a retailer responding to this need?

2. This isn't your grandma's decorating season. I'm not making fun of grandparents; I love mine! I also love their decorations ... at their house. They are familiar and traditional and cozy, but it's not what I want for my house. Forget all the chatter about Generations X and Y. What it really boils down to is diversification of inventory.

White pine roping and traditional wreaths are still the bread and butter of holiday décor. However, they are only the bread and butter. They are not then entire meal. If that is all you are serving, your guests are going to leave your place hungry.

Don't be afraid to try a new recipe this upcoming season and introduce a new item to your lineup.

Some fresh recipe ideas include plain wreaths adorning a door, but stacked in the shape of a snowman. Another idea would be to fill window boxes with fresh, fragrant evergreens for some fun winter-long color. If some of your warm-weather outdoor furniture stays out all winter too, maybe layer them with evergreens, wreaths and swags in a creative and colorful way.

Suggest new recipes with the mindset of "winter gardening" as opposed to "Christmas decorating" and see what new creations you can cook up. Be sure to display these ideas in your own locations for visual inspiration for your customers to duplicate at their own homes.

3. Give your customers a K.I.S.S. Just like your other seasons, customers still need signage and need to be shown how to create the same look and feel at home. Let's use porch pots as an example. Create some winter porch pots and display them as part of a vignette that has all the material they need to do-it-yourself. Sell them finished, too, for those time-crunched individuals. Host a porch pot workshop for some "mess-at-your-place-not-mine" fun.

Please don't just assume your customers know what they want. Wreaths stacked on a table and a pile of pine roping aren't inspiring. Customers want a K.I.S.S. from you so "Keep It Simple Silly" and help them create that winter display at your shop that will brighten their homes during the long, gray and dreary winter months.

Then, when the weather warms and the sun comes out again, they will be cleaning out their winter gardens and returning to you for spring. **LGR**

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