



Ask P. Allen Smith

Merchandising the Outdoor Living Trend

Q As more consumers are trying to capture the look and feel of indoor living in an outdoor environment, what can a garden center offer to help them achieve that goal?

A s part of my response to this question, I want to address something that is on the minds of many garden center owners: how a slowing economy might impact their business this year. While it might seem that the most sensible thing to do is just hold steady and not change anything, experience has taught me that when customers feel they need to do some belt tightening, they often scale back on items such as travel and vacations but still look for economical ways to bring enjoyment and beauty into their lives. Garden centers can fill that need by demonstrating ways to create a private getaway at home.

For half the money that they would spend on gas, plane tickets, food and accommodations — all of which are temporary enjoyments — homeowners can create outdoor settings with all the style and comfort of indoor living and get that “vacation feeling” for months, not just two weeks. But to help them see the advantage of what you have to offer, they need some encouragement.

I’ve found the best way to motivate people to create outdoor living areas is to show them inspiring examples where they can imagine themselves relaxing with family and friends. If you have a spot where you can set up a garden room so customers can see ideas on how they can create a private oasis, that’s a great start. If your inventory doesn’t include these items, it may be in your interest to partner with someone who does sell outdoor furnishings and accessories. They may be willing to collaborate with you to set up three rotations of seasonal furniture to combine with your plants.

Create Successful Examples

Why go to all this work? The settings are needed so customers can visualize what they will be getting for their investment. In other words, if your garden center sells containers, soil and plants, a customer might stop by thinking she wants to fill a couple of containers and buy one bag of soil and

a few six-packs of plants. But if she comes in and sees a beautiful setting filled with hanging baskets, planters and several containers, she may be more inspired to copy that look and, in doing so, purchase more supplies. Signs that advertise how customers can create a vacation spot at home may also encourage them to see how much they can save buying plants in lieu of plane tickets.

I find that more and more customers are looking at plants as a way to accent a setting rather than plant a garden. In doing so, they need ideas that will encourage them to try new combinations or ways to display containers. Seeing how plants can enhance an outdoor setting helps them feel more confident about taking that step. ▶



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PERSPECTIVE

Spell It Out

When I advise homeowners how to enhance their outdoor settings, I give them some basic guidelines to follow. If you have an area to set up demonstrations of each of these concepts, you’ll be giving them more reasons to buy from you. You may also want to point out some money-saving strategies along the way.

Enhance curb appeal. Encourage customers to take advantage of the entire approach to the house. Rather than enclose the whole yard, a wallet-wise alternative can be created with a gate, shrubs and easy-care bedding plants right at the property line. Colorful, flower-filled containers along the steps to the front door draw the eye and visitors up the walk to the front entry.

Make it comfortable. Set up a display using weather-resistant rugs, outdoor lamps and cushioned furniture, and invite customers to relax and sit a while. Show how patios or terraces can be arranged for two distinct settings such as a dining area with a glass-topped table and chairs and a comfortable sitting spot complete with two relaxing rocking chairs. Add plants with fragrance and interesting textures and shapes for extra appeal.

Coordinate colors. Demonstrate how to blend the colors of the containers, plants, fabrics and furnishings so they work together to create a sense of harmony. Lay out fabrics with color-coordinated plants to show customers how to create inviting themes. If this isn’t an area that you are comfortable with, see if you might engage the consulting services of a talented designer to help you set up the display.

Make it long-lasting and easy-care. Point out ways to make the setting low maintenance and long lasting. Demonstrate self-watering containers with the right blend of soil, automatic watering kits, durable outdoor fabrics and well-designed furnishings.

Keep it personal. Use elements that display a sense of style and humor. Add statues, garden gnomes or an element of surprise to keep it lighthearted and fun. Look for ways to add personal touches that reflect the varied interests of your customers.

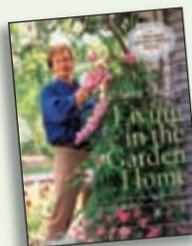
If you are short on space or don’t have another person to collaborate with, consider making some poster-size pictures of great-looking outdoor rooms, then duplicate the containers and plantings illustrated in the picture around it. The idea is to inspire your customers to do more.

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Contain Yourself!

Container gardens are another area where you can give your customers some simple guidelines to boost their confidence to try something new. For example, I often use my “three shape” rule when describing how to select plants for a container. The idea is to combine three basic plant forms in each arrangement. I use a plant that is tall and spiky in the back of the container, then fill in the middle with plants that have a round and full form and finish the container with plants that cascade over the edge.

Whenever I arrange a combination of plants from each of these categories, the result is a more appealing and dynamic design. These three basic forms complement one another so well that it doesn’t really matter whether the plants ever bloom — it encourages customers to look for combinations of foliage and flowering plants. Try setting up a few examples, and point out the three shapes to inspire customers to create their own designs. 🌿



P. Allen Smith (www.pallensmith.com) is a professional garden designer, host of two national TV programs, a regular guest on NBC’s Today Show and author of P. Allen Smith’s Living in the Garden Home (Clarkson Potter, 2007) and other books in the Garden Home series.