

Exotics

Selling exotic plants through creative merchandising can add appeal to your garden center and attract new customers all year.

By Don Eberly

Garden centers have no trouble attracting customers in the spring, when homeowners are eager to revive their winter-weary gardens; what gets tricky is keeping them coming all year. Enter exotic plants, an important category for retailers looking to drive consumer traffic and profits year round.

Alluring exotic plants draw consumers of most every demographic with color and style that make unique gifts for birthdays, Valentine's Day, Easter and Mother's Day. Orchids, bromeliads and Oriental x Trumpet lilies are longer lasting than cut flowers and more satisfying than chocolates. As everyday purchases, exotic plants beautifully complement home décor with a variety of colors and forms. And in the winter, customers craving warm weather will buy exotics to tide them over until spring.

Adding exotics to your inventory can supplement exterior plant products and widen the opportunity for impulse purchases: Bromeliads, orchids and lilies satisfy savvy garden shoppers and unsuspecting passersby alike.

Ovation for Orchids

One of the fastest growing segments in floriculture, the orchid market is thriving. They're no longer perceived as luxury items, but they still generate high retail margins. Though there are nearly 40,000 identified orchid species, four common and popular types are paphiopedilum, oncidium, dendrobium and phalaenopsis. Paphiopedilum orchids have a distinct, pouch-like lip that traps pollinators, though the plant is not carnivorous. Oncidium is a large genus of more than 400 species; colors, leaves and stems are extremely varied

among the species. Dendrobium orchids include more than 1,000 species and are remarkable in their diversity of form, size and color. However, phalaenopsis is likely the most popular as evidenced by consumer requests and sales.

"Breeding efforts over the past century have introduced new colors, patterns and large, round, striking flowers arranged in arching sprays," says Marcella Lucio, director of marketing for Silver Vase, Inc., a company that markets orchids and bromeliads. "Because they grow well within average home conditions, phalaenopsis are consumer favorites."

Phalaenopsis orchids are known for blooms in delicate shades of white, pink, dark pink, fuchsia and yellow. They boast several flowers on single, double or multiple spikes. Single-spike varieties such as Silver Vase, Inc.'s 'Peachy', a yellow with terra-cotta blots, and 'Vivian', which blooms fuchsia with red lips and yellow dots, are the most common at retail. Double-spike plants such as deep-purple 'Fancy Frills' and 'Golden Treasure' are high-value options, providing more blooms and color. 'Alabaster', featuring white flowers with a yellow and wine-red center, is a branched multispoke variety.

For consumers who cannot get enough orchids for their homes, Novalis Plants That Work has cultivated a cold-hardy version for the outdoors. Bletilla 'Chinese Butterfly', a shade perennial that blooms from spring through summer (to USDA Zone 6b), features creamy-yellow flowers accented by a dotted, maroon lip, says Linda Guy, new plant development manager for Novalis Plants That Work.

Bravo for Bromeliads

Bromeliads provide shelf life like no other plant, which should make them a garden center staple. "They come in so many shapes, sizes and price points that retailers cannot go wrong," Lucio says. They are cheerful and festive, adaptable and simple to maintain. They tolerate infrequent watering, yet varieties like the bright-pink guzmania 'Zamora' and guzmania 'Ostara' bloom for three months or more, reproducing consistently and rapidly. They do not attract many pests, and the many available varieties offer a diverse array of forms, foliage and flowers, such as the uniquely structured, orange-flowered vriesea 'Splennriete'. ♦



Above: Phalaenopsis 'Fancy Frills'. Top: Phalaenopsis 'Peachy'. Opposite: Lilium 'Avocado' (Photos: Silver Vase, Inc.)

“Most bromeliads are very resilient, so consumers can continue to enjoy them even after they flower,” Lucio says. “Most do well in pots and planters that provide good drainage and airflow.” Best of all, once they are potted, they can simply be enjoyed.

Next time a customer asks for a houseplant that will survive her black thumb, recommend a bromeliad.

Love for Lilies

With huge flowers, intense fragrance and rich colors, Oriental x Trumpet lilies practically sell themselves. Favorite choices in the garden or as cut flowers in bridal bouquets, potted Oriental x Trumpet lilies also can jazz up almost any indoor environment. Oriental x Trumpet lilies are heat tolerant and multiply quickly. Novalis Plants That

Work sells more than 15 varieties of Oriental x Trumpet lilies for both interior and landscape applications.

“New hybrid varieties of Oriental x Trumpet lilies offer all of the same charm as traditional Trumpet lilies, but they bloom later with a lighter, lovely sweet fragrance,” Guy says. The program offering includes eight varieties in vibrant colors.

The Value of Merchandising



Merchandising exotic plants well is essential to high-level success and adds to retailers’ overall appeal. High-end customers tend to prefer color coordination, whereas many price-conscious consumers prefer color and texture variety. Plan ahead to create thematic displays based upon color for each holiday and gift-giving occasion. Build a display of plants to make a statement about the impact exotic plants have on home décor and customers’ daily quality of life.

Pairing bromeliads and poinsettias at Christmas puts a twist on the traditional holiday product offer. For Valentine’s Day, consider using different-colored pots or Mylar wraps helping to explain the meaning behind each gift. This could help the customer choose a gift that’s appropriate for his mother and one that is a little spicier for his sweetheart. Or try marketing orchids and lilies in Easter baskets, complete with Easter grass and eggs at the plants’ bases, can command higher price points.

Keep a plentiful supply of fresh product and update displays regularly to provide customers with the highest quality plants and remove the purchasing guesswork for them. This lends to return business during springtime and any time gifts or décor are top of mind.

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For more information on these flowers and specific varieties mentioned, visit www.silvervase.com and www.novalis.com.

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An assortment of guzmania bromeliads

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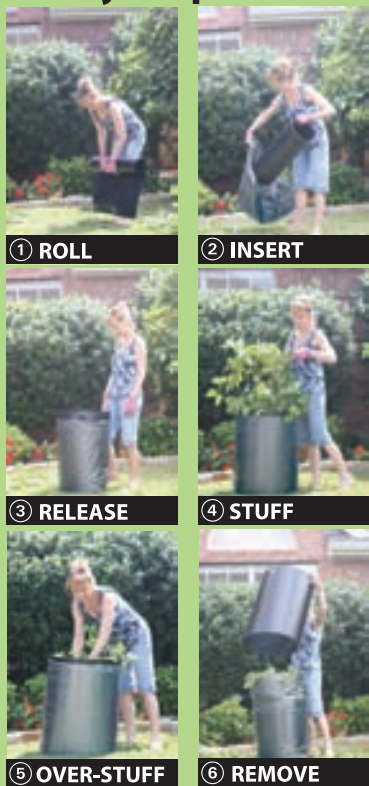
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