

MAKING AUGUST WORK



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While most retailers are starting to benefit from the back-to-school buying season, garden retailers traditionally suffer one of their toughest retail months in August. The days of customers waiting to get in the front gate are long-since gone, killed this year by the heat wave that has plagued most of the country for the past 6-8 weeks. And even if your area skirted the extreme heat, nobody puts off gardening until August; whatever was going to be done happened many weeks ago.

So what do we as garden retailers do this time of year...other than take vacation? Is there any hope to make some money in August, or should these few weeks be viewed as the dead zone between spring/summer and fall?

A Bad Direction

I know this is a pretty risky statement because an increasing number of garden centers are not like this, but...I have seen way too many garden centers give up on August. They expect sales to be bad and don't keep up the store, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Think about it; why would someone want to shop a store that looks picked over, where the merchandise is the same you saw two months earlier?

Have you ever walked into Crate & Barrel and seen the store dirty and unstaffed? What about Whole Foods? Have you ever gone to a produce department there and seen old product? (Yes, it is the same; they are both perishable product; they both have a shelf life.) Without fresh plants, new merchandise, excited employees and great promotions, you can't possibly hope to make August into anything other than what it is: a money pit that's only good for vacation and early set-up for the fall.

A Good Example

I see the 31 days in August as an opportunity to make money, and I know other people — other garden retailers — do as well. I know you're probably thinking only in large markets or at fancy stores, but that's not true.

I was visiting with a grower friend of mine a couple of months ago, and I asked him why the greenhouse was so full. He proceeded to tell me about the huge summer business his company has created and how they now sell more during the summer than they do in spring.

His "secret" is he sells heat-tolerant plants that can withstand drying down a bit, and he only sells them in large formats. In other words, he sells plants that have a chance of surviving a couple of months until first frost. His other "secret" is that he was dedicated to the concept and stuck with it through a couple of tough years of dumping product and losing money. He said it was pretty hard for a while, but they had faith in the plan and are certainly reaping the benefits now.

His customer? Wal-mart. If this company created a summer market with Wal-mart customers, who are not loyal and not knowledgeable about gardening, you can do it at your garden center. I know it's a pretty different way to look at August, but it's definitely worth considering.

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LAWN & GARDEN Retailer

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Subscription Information

Lawn & Garden Retailer magazine (ISSN 1540-9023) is published nine times a year in January, February, March, April, June, July, August, September and November by



Scranton Gillette Communications, Inc.,
380 E. Northwest Highway, Suite 200,
Des Plaines, IL 60016-2282.
Telephone: (847) 391-1000 Fax: (847) 390-0408.

Subscription rates in the U.S. are \$30 per year (Canada and Mexico are \$50 and all other countries are \$60 payable in U.S. currency). Periodical postage paid at Des Plaines, IL 60018 and at additional mailing offices. Reproduction of contents is forbidden. Copyright 2006.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Circulation Department, Lawn & Garden Retailer, 380 E. Northwest Highway, Suite 200, Des Plaines, IL 60016-2282. PRINTED IN USA.



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