

UNLIMITED OUTDOOR LIVING

Take a few tips from this Chicago-based retailer on how to effectively merchandise furniture in limited space.

By Cheryl Woolley



Merchandising a home and garden store in a congested urban area is challenge enough, but when the owners of our garden center decided to invest heavily in outdoor furniture, we were faced with an obvious challenge: Where do we put it?

While outdoor living products do demand a large chunk of real estate, it is possible to offer customers a satisfying mix of products without jeopardizing sales in other areas. On the contrary, outdoor furniture is now a natural extension of the complete line of home and garden goods and services the customers at Jayson Home and Garden, Chicago, have come to expect.



CREATING GARDEN ROOMS

Experimenting with the merchandising of these products has provided several painful lessons. The one that makes most of us cringe in recollecting is the attempt we made at creating a “showroom” for the outdoor furniture. Day after day, we would watch as people approached the area of the store devoted to our garden furniture, stopped on the periphery, scanned the room and walked away. Of course, we now realize that divorced from its natural setting, our carefully selected teak, cast aluminum and vintage furniture looked odd and severe, arranged as it was one piece after the next — indoors, no less! It is still one of those “what-were-we-thinking?” moments that we’re humble enough to admit was an utter failure.

What was once so elusive now seems so obvious — outdoor furniture gets merchandised outside. If you are convinced you have no space to sacrifice for anything as unnecessary as teak tables and chairs or as impractical as a three-tiered fountain, consider these products assets in your effort to create a beautiful and convincing outdoor garden setting.

The concept of a “garden room” or the garden as an extension of the home is the current pop-garden phenomenon. Those of us who have been gardening for years, particularly in less-hospitable climates, have often thought of the garden as a welcomed good-weather home addition. Taking the same approach to our selling space as many homeowners do with their own property, Jayson’s refocuses our attention outside once spring weather arrives. Our vintage brickyard transforms from parking lot to sales lot, housing not only our live gardening material, but also all of our garden furniture.

The same philosophy we use inside to display upholstered pieces and case goods is applied to the garden: designing living spaces that combine interesting, comfortable and pleasing elements. Areas are created by placing furniture, planted containers, fountains and garden ornaments in compact arrangements that move effortlessly between mass groupings of live material. This is a real opportunity to not only show the furniture in its intended setting, but to show-off the design talents of garden staff by using outstanding planted containers. The

Don’t do this — merchandising all garden furniture in a separate showroom setting is one of the things Jayson Garden has learned not to do. Customers stopped, scanned the room and walked away.

Jayson stocks and displays its outdoor living goods only during the warmer months, when they can create "garden rooms" in their intended setting — the outdoors. These rooms are created by placing furniture, planted containers, fountains and garden accents in compact arrangements between groupings of green goods.

interest these elements lend each other is indisputable, inspiring many customers to begin rethinking their own garden rooms.

KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS

A large part of successfully merchandising outdoor living products is knowing your limitations. Serving a mostly urban customer whose gardens are often high-rise balconies or rooftop decks, we've learned the importance of appropriately sized furnishings. The 24-inch bistro tables and the romantically tight two-seater benches are generally the first things to go. We don't have room — and neither do our customers — for big shade umbrellas or tables that extend much past 40 inches. If space is limited, keep offerings to a reasonable size, particularly if your customer is as pressed for space as you are.

Having limited space also demands a certain restriction in the variety of products offered. Our buyers are judicious in their decisions about what we will and will not be able to show. A small selling space is actually a silent reminder to be as discerning as possible in the selection of products. We may not be able to offer a wide selection of garden furnishings, but what we do have is largely unavailable at other area retailers. Yes, Costco will always under-price us, which is why it's imperative we offer a beautiful and unique product to our customers.

The enormous advantage to showing all of our outdoor furniture in our selling yard has been the simplicity it offers customers who come in specifically looking for these products. At various times, we have had our garden furniture in the previously mentioned, ill-fated "showroom," our indoor sales floor and outside in the yard. Nothing could have been more confusing to the customer. Salespeople walked customers throughout the store, and then proceeded to direct them outside to see more. Placing the garden furniture indoors may have lent an advantage to the presentation of some other categories, providing a beautiful "fixture" on which to display a line of pots or bath goods, but it did nothing to show the features of the furniture. The efficiency of our current approach not only saves customers from the frustration of having to search out the goods they're in the market for, but it allows them to shop independently without the lingering sense that they must be missing something.

Garden furniture is a comparatively small category for us — seven percent of our sales last season. Yet we know offering such products lends the plant yard character and authenticity in the eyes of customers looking for design ideas. By starting small and including outdoor living products in natural-looking garden settings, customers will feel inspired to create their own garden rooms. 🌿

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Wrought-iron furniture

By popular demand, the Florence sofa and armchair have been reintroduced by Gentry's Iron Works. This oversized garden-seating ensemble has European detailing and all-weather cushions. The wrought-iron frames are available in many colors and are electrostatically finished to guard against the elements. Gentry's Iron Works. (404) 367-9191. **Write in 1443**



Garden torches

These fireballs will illuminate the evening sky from any back porch or garden path. Also available on an aluminum stick in terra cotta, champagne or anthracite hues. Propellant is housed in a refillable aluminum canister. Meyer Imports Ltd. (800) 267-8562. **Write in 1446**

Arbor bench

This arbor retreat is available in two styles and seats up to three people. It is constructed of durable cedar and is available in sizes from 4-6 ft. All sizes ship UPS and are easy to assemble. Danove. (800) 859-6399. **Write in 1444**



Hammock

The Softweave Hammock features interwoven ribbons of fabric to provide the body-hugging comfort of a rope hammock, the cool airflow of an open-weave hammock and the weather resistance and quilted comfort of a hammock. It is constructed of hunter green fabric and solid oak spreader bars. The Hammock Source. (800) 334-1078. **Write in 1445** ▶