

Tropical Foliage for the Winter

Using your foliage department effectively in the winter will help with the slow season traffic.

By Bisser Georgiev

"You want me to offer indoor tropical foliage in my store during the month of November? You must be out of your mind..." This is the most common statement we hear when we suggest retailers diversify their product mix during the winter months. Usually they give us the same odd look that is questioning the quality of our sanity. "Having tropical plants in the store right before the holidays just won't work...No one wants to buy ficus and calathea in November; they all want poinsettias and evergreens – it's tradition!"

Well, in reality, it is hard to argue with tradition. But let's look closer at how traditions, or in this case, purchasing habits are formed. Are they really the results of repetitive social behavior that a number of generations and peers have passed to us? Aren't traditions sometimes simply established thru means of our education and by the powerful influence of advertisers, marketers and retailers? How hard is it to change a purchasing habit? And how difficult would it be to convince our customer to pickup a few beautiful houseplants together with their Christmas tree?

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Many retailers readily accept the predicament that October, November and early December sales will be in the slumps. The weather is cold, days are short, and when the sun barely shows, it is just to deliver the dreamy nostalgia for lush flowerbeds and the warmth of spring. Unfortunately, moods like this in the early winter season have forced consumers into a quest for emotional gratification and retailers into a search for alternative profit potential. As a result, holiday merchandise starts to appear on the shelves earlier each year — sometimes as early as the end of October. However, this could hardly be called a creative approach to fulfilling the needs of a "nature-starved" market.

We all have noticed the shift in our society toward healthier lifestyles and spiritual well being. We are busier than ever, high levels of stress are becoming a normality, commuting distances are increasing and workloads are not decreasing. Time has morphed itself from valuable commodity to luxury. The blinding speed of our days has created an intuitive impulse for a connection with nature. We are all starved for something green and warm in our lives, especially in the dark, long months of winter. ♦



Top and bottom: Pasquesi Home and Garden, Barrington, Ill.

The demand for indoor plants in the winter is definitely present. However, time availability for learning and researching about plants is not. One way retailers can capitalize on this new trend is to create impulse purchase magnets in their stores. There are very

few people who will walk into a garden center with a predefined goal to buy houseplants in the winter. However, almost nobody can resist the lush look of a healthy display of tropical foliage adorned by creative and very informative POP materials.

HOW TO SUCCEED

I've been fortunate to work for what I think is one of the best companies in the foliage business for over 11 years: Hermann Engelmann Greenhouses, the parent of the Exotic Angel Plants. During marketing research activi-

ties with consumers and countless conversations with retailers we always aimed to discover what our consumers want and how their purchasing decisions are formed. The intricate anatomy of the houseplant purchase proved to be quite simple and yet, very powerful. Here is the basic outline for this purchasing process:

Attention grabbers. Consumers are always attracted to a display by exotic varieties, healthy looks and robust foliage.

Price. It needs to be clearly marked and easy to find. After noticing the price, a consumer immediately locks in a "value vs. price" perception point. The decision is still in the air.

Need for confirmation. This is the most critical point. The consumer will look for assurance, which will help shift the "value vs. price" perception point to a more positive light. This is where informative tags, POP materials and display brochures become priceless. Simply reading that some plant's origins are from Brazil may inspire a longing feeling for the tropics and the desire to bring them home.

Decision. To buy or not to buy, this is the question! With extremely attractive looks and a very low price

USING EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

The following information should help you develop the content for your educational materials.

Toxin Removal. The modern office and home builders did a great job of keeping the outside out and the inside in. Fumes and bacteria, which would normally have exited outside, are now sealed with us inside structures that simply don't ventilate well. Indoor air pollution has become a problem, often leading to the new breed of a health disorder known as Sick Building Syndrome. Plants can help reduce the health hazards caused by enclosed spaces by absorbing the chemicals into their leaves and breaking them down. Microbes around a plant's roots also take care of the toxins by converting them into plant food.

Air Quality. There have been a number of NASA studies indicating that having indoor foliage plants in our offices or homes can significantly improve the quality of the air we breathe. In fact, according to one of the studies, under controlled conditions, plants are able to remove 99.9 percent of most common household toxins from polluted indoor air. Some plants specialize in removing one toxin or another. Ficus and spider plants, for instance, are effective against formaldehyde. Good all-rounders include Boston ferns, Areca palms, spathiphyllum, English ivy, dracaena and gold pothos.

Aesthetics. Plants inside homes not only provide a healthier environment by being natural air filters, but they bring important aesthetic aspects to the environment of the house. By having some other sorts of living things in the environment, we feel more relaxed and emotionally calm.

Care. The average home in winter is as dry as the Kalahari Desert, but definitely not as bright. To help your customers maintain the health of their plants, please recommend the following:

- Group plants to help maintain moisture. When one plant transpires, or releases moisture, the plants near it benefit by absorbing that water.
- Fill a tray with attractive stones and fill with water until it just covers the rocks. Set the planter on top of the pebble tray and water the rocks every two weeks.
- Place marble chips in the bottom of a watertight container. Pour water over the chips until almost covered. Place the potted plant into the container over wet marble chips.
- Use a humidifier in your home.
- Do not over water: The number-one reason houseplants don't thrive in the winter is over-watering.
- Look for low-light-acclimated plants that have been grown indoors.



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this would be an easy decision. However, exotic quality is always accompanied by high price. The level of confirmation supported by quality information is the strongest influence to the outcome of the closing decision for the consumer.

BREAKING THE FEAR

Informative labels and attractive POP can do wonders with consumers who are afraid to buy houseplants. Very often we theorize why Americans buy a lot fewer plants than Europeans. Some say that in Europe plants are viewed more like disposable items, such as cut flowers — they are only expected to last a finite number of days before they are thrown away and replaced by new ones. According to the same theory, Americans have the hardest time parting with their beloved dying plants. We nurture our plants on life support for many weeks, and at the end we sadly put their dry skeletons out in garden with the dim hope that the dead croton will miraculously spring back to life. All this is accompanied

by a great deal of grief and guilt that we have killed a living thing. These emotions further lead to the psychological conditions known as “brown thumb.” People with “brown thumbs” usually shy away from buying plants just because they don’t want to experience the same disappointment again.

This theory has some merit. However, people in Europe value and respect living things as much as people do here in the United States. It is imbedded in our human psyche that plants we bring home are fully dependent on us, and therefore we are proud of their beauty, and we feel sorry for their misfortunes. The point is not to market the disposability aspect of the houseplant, but to provide more information and encourage more people to bring a piece of nature to their homes. This is the reason Europeans buy more plants — retailers were able to educate them about what type of plants to buy for their homes’ conditions and what benefits the plants bring to their homes. Plants in Europe ♦

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have become necessary elements for the household environment.

ATTRACTING THE CUSTOMERS

Having educational materials at the point of purchase, such as coun-

try of origin, light and watering needs is very important, but not enough (see sidebar on page 28 for more educational material information). Pictures of lifestyle settings involving plants can bring many ideas for creative interior décor. Lists

of health-related, emotional and aesthetic benefits that houseplants deliver can have a dramatic effect on the closing purchasing decision for any customer. But most importantly, have attractive indoor plants available in the store at all times.

Plants are no longer just a hobby for few avid gardeners that supported the start of the garden center industry. Plants are becoming a part of our lifestyle and an expression of our sense for well being and craving for nature. The preconception that indoor foliage plants don't sell in the winter could be easily overturned by simply giving them a try this November. Here are few steps that can help you boost your sales and improve your profitability during the cold season.

Source. Find a quality grower of unusual foliage plants with a wide variety collection. Make sure that all plants supplied by the grower are produced indoors and acclimated for low-light conditions.

Display. Create a houseplant display in a high traffic area of your store. Make sure that all plants are watered, clean and healthy looking. One dying plant on the display can bring negative thoughts to the consumer's mind and shift the "value vs. price" perception down to nothing.

Draw. Design a catchy sign that will attract attention to the display. The sign could read something creative such as "Natural Air Purifiers" or "Air Toxins Removers."

Educate. Educate your consumers, and encourage them to buy plants by creating POP cards or printed brochures about the benefits of indoor foliage in the winter like aesthetics or care instructions.

Most indoor foliage plants are easier to maintain in the winter than many people think. Encouraging your customers to purchase houseplants by providing them with the numerous benefits and simple care instructions can significantly improve your winter revenues and boost your bottom line profitability. The demand for houseplants is growing, and consumers of all types are starving for something green in their homes. So, give indoor foliage plants a chance this winter — you may be pleasantly surprised. 🌱

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