

What I Learned In

EuroAmerican's chief marketer grows on lessons from his store

Retail

By Mitch Whitten



Six years ago, Josh Schneider built his own garden center, Morning Dove Farms, in Mahomet, Ill. But a passion for new plants took him westward, where he is now director of sales and marketing for EuroAmerican Propagators. Although he travels 120,000 miles a year around the world, we found him on his cell phone at the company's headquarters in Bonsall, Calif.

Tell us something you brought to EuroAmerican from your store?

Our early spring program. At Morning Dove, we developed a program that's frost-resistant, that can be grown cold. The name of the game in retail is turn — how can you get more turn from your space. Why not give customers something that can take the cold, wet, widely varying temperature of early spring?

How's the program doing?

We sold three times more than we expected the first year. We've expanded to include other varieties. It's still a small program, but we expect to sell 4-5 times more than last year. It helps the grower have product for the retailer and helps the retailer in the eyes of the consumer because they have something that will work.

Is there anything worse than turning down a customer with money in her pocket?

Part of what I learned in retail was that when a customer comes in your store and wants to buy something, you don't send them away. I learned that in the fall market. Customers would come to my garden center in mid-August and I'd say, "We're going to have some great pansies, violas and mums in three weeks; come back." When I had product available earlier, I sold 3-4 times the usual volume.

Why did you start a garden center?

I wasn't finding what I wanted at my local

garden centers so I built one. I built a place where my customers could have a complete horticultural experience, where they could see things they only saw in magazines.

Magazines? It's hard to find those plants anywhere!

There is such a disconnect between the consumer press and our industry. They often write about things that we aren't growing or selling. Retailers should be reading consumer garden magazines because that's what people will be asking for.

Complete the sentence: We could sell more plants if ...

We paid attention to what the consumer is looking for and merchandised the product in a way that adds value. If you went into Nordstrom and found all the Ralph Lauren product piled onto palettes and blocks, you'd assume there was a fire sale.

Wobbly, rusty benches don't exactly support a healthy price point.

We insist on showing our product in undesirable locations in an undesirable way, and we wonder why there is downward price pressure.

The success of the mass merchant is in turning a large volume of product at a low price. The success of the independent is in added value — whether that's in service or merchandising or high quality or depth of selection or all of those things.

Some nurseries have not yet realized the importance of merchandising and added-value product. Their stores are organized for the convenience of the people who work there and not for the customer.

Don't we need to stimulate more impulse sales?

We have to be aware that many of the deci-

sions made in the garden center are based on how customers feel at the moment. Every plant has a story. That's one thing we miss as an industry. We need to tell the story of the plant in an exciting way. Like the legend of forget-me-nots and the star-crossed lovers. I put that story on a sign and sold out of the plants.

What's the best thing about being a retailer?

Every day is a complete surprise. That's part of what makes it fun. We can predict, but we can never really know for sure. Garden centers have the best customers of any retailer in the world. People come in because they love gardening. They are happy and they want to spend their money.

Your favorite plants?

Coleus. It's so different. I love interesting textures. Scirpus grass or fiber optics grass. Once a customer touches it, they have to buy it. And nemesia. It's tough, takes cold and heat and smells good.

I like workhorse plants. Plants can't just be weird and nerdy. That's not where the volume is. The volume is in plants that fix things and make people feel good about their success in the garden.

You have to showcase their benefit rather than just saying this is red and 12 inches tall. This plant thrives in dry shade. This plant does beautifully in a window box. This thrives all season.

Leave us with some parting advice.

Grow and sell more of what people want.

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