

BECOME A GROWING RESOURCE

Independent garden centers can ward off the winter blues by offering classes and informational resources during the cold months to prepare customers for the spring buying

By Susan Ward

I had so much to do before spring arrived and was counting on my local garden center to provide me with all the resources I needed. Like many people, I made a resolution for this new year: I decided I would not put off my spring planning until it was too late. I would organize myself so that I was not rushing around and praying that the rain held off for just another hour. I would lay out my landscaping plans early and buy the products I wanted before my neighbor, Betty, bought out the store. I had many goals, and organization was crucial.

I had been planning for this spring since last spring; however, the bulk of my work had just begun. Last year, I began experimenting a bit with my gardening style — I was more creative and daring

than in years past. I stepped out of my classical landscaping box and decided to test the waters. To keep up with my new style, I had to spend more time researching products — my usual resources have proven to be of little help to me in finding what is trendy for the upcoming season. I've found the Internet to be quite useful. I began to seek out changes to incorporate into my garden and knew my local garden center would have the answers I was looking for.

BECOMING A RESOURCE

I love the anticipation I feel waiting for the end of April to come. I love walking into my garden center and seeing all of the preparations they are making for the annual arrivals. I also love shopping at my garden center in the dead of winter. Many people find me crazy and wonder what in the world I would be looking for. And while it is true that the selection is at a bare minimum in the winter months, the attention I receive during the “down” season is something I crave in the springtime. When I shop at the garden center in February, I have my own personal assistant waiting to answer any of my questions.

Last week, I took one of my much-anticipated adventures to the garden center. My first stop was the resource center, where I was hoping to find information about companion planting. I had done my own searching on the Internet but thought my best bet was to look at the



garden center. Much to my surprise, few resources were available to me. The storeowner, John, and I have become good friends. He appreciates my loyalty to his store, and he is often willing to go out of his way for good customers. I was asking John why his information section was lacking. He honestly had no good answers for me and apologized for the inconvenience. I shared with him the impact it could have on his store, especially during the “winter slump.”

During this season, people usually don't want to leave the convenience and warmth of their homes. Seed catalogs are a wonderful alternative for gardeners like me. I can thoroughly study the catalog and make wise choices about products I would like to purchase. I was sharing with John my conflict of wanting to support his garden center but the lure of shopping ease that the catalog gives me. I let him know that if the garden center could support my needs in the winter, I would give up the convenience of the catalog for his store. We sat there for a while and discussed what ideas I would like to see implemented at his garden center, including my ideas for more resources.

Winter is a prime time for classes, which would be a wonderful asset to his customers during the season when his store is not fully stocked. They really get gardeners pumped up for springtime and would help familiarize them with John's store. I also told him that he needed to be




fully stocked with informational material to get his customers thinking about what they are going to buy in April. John also has a wonderful Web site that he can take full advantage of. I suggested he send out periodic emails to remind his customers of promotions and provide them with landscaping ideas and tips. John has all the necessary tools; he just needs to utilize them to their best capacity.

COMPETING EFFECTIVELY

My neighborhood garden center has other products to keep customers rolling in. John has a great selection of indoor plants, and his gift center is outstanding. His store also has a wide variety of spring bulbs already in flower, which I often purchase for indoor use and then plant outdoors when the ground is ready. While sales are down, John also has an opportunity to promote his floral shop. He said this last winter he was focusing on pumping up this end of the business. He did extra advertising and some big promotions at Valentine's and saw some new customers come in — he was thrilled with the response.

I was hoping to find some great resources on my last trip, and I was excited to see if John had released his new seeds for the season. I was delighted when I saw what he had. As I mentioned before, I normally purchase my seed products from catalogs. In general, I find that they have the best variety and the most unique selection. John's store has never been one to have a wide assortment of seeds and definitely nothing out of the ordinary. As I stood there, excited to see seed upon seed filling the wall, I called John over. I had to thank him for the new offerings and ask him what made him purchase so many. He began by explaining how tired he was of seed catalogs taking away his business and said he had resolved to offer unique seeds and a larger variety for the next two years. I promised that I would support his expansion.

John has a lot to offer his customers. Not only is his store a wonderful place to shop in the spring and summer, but he also now has the products to draw people in

during the winter. With expanded offerings to his customers and a great selection of seed, I know he will see an increase during the typical "winter slump." 

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