

# Fresh from the Garden Center

Sure, some garden centers got started as little produce stands, but those produce stands are not so little anymore.

By Carrie Burns

Many garden center owners, managers and other employees have produce to thank for their beginnings. Most of us have heard the story, “Grandpa set up a seasonal produce stand and later brought in some flowers, and that’s where we got our start.” Now, however, it seems as if garden retailing has moved away from produce. For some, that may be a good thing. For others, a produce department — large or small — is a big part of the business, and it’s not going anywhere anytime soon. Three great examples of successful produce departments come to mind — Sickles Market, Little Silver, N.J.; Nick’s Garden Center & Farm Market, Aurora, Colo.; and Tom’s Farm Market & Greenhouses, Huntley, Ill.

## BEGINNINGS

“My grandfather and father were [produce] farmers, and [at one time] they owned about 150-200 acres, but as the area developed they farmed a little less,” said Bob Sickles, owner of Sickles Market. “My dad still farms, and about 6-7 years ago he started growing on about 30-50 acres. The garden center grew out of our homegrown tomatoes. Then, customers were wanting to buy impatiens and everything we grew.” Now the produce department at Sickles carries everything from cherries, seedless grapes, blackberries and blueberries to broccoli, spinach, cauliflower, potatoes and everything in between. Customers can also find pre-made foods and baked goods as well as the typical garden center products. “We don’t



**Left:** Sickles focuses heavily on its produce section, carrying a wide variety of product. **Right:** You have to keep shelf life in mind when carrying produce. Make sure you are stocked with only the freshest product available as does Sickles.

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## OFF-SEASON IDEAS



really consider ourselves a garden center per se — more of a specialty retail store," said Sickles.

Another retailer that has made its produce department successful is the much smaller Nick's Garden Center & Farm Market. "My dad originally started in the produce business 45 years ago," said Randy Ortega, owner/manager of Nick's. "When we finally got into the nursery business, about 17 years ago, we started out as a little nursery. But since we had our roots in produce, my dad wanted to have a little produce market in our garden center." Now, Nick's buys in a variety of produce, such as peaches, apples and green peppers from local growers for its seasonal produce department.

Tom's Farm Market follows much the same pattern of having its roots in produce. "Tom started through high school peddling produce, and after college, started Tom's [Farm Market]," said Mary Manning, manager of Tom's. "Once the area started booming, customers started to ask for other things. So we had to start complementing [with] other things. Now we go from season to season." Flowers actually fit into Tom's produce business and schedule; that's how the garden center was established: It fit

together with growing the majority of their produce such as green beans, cucumbers, peppers, watermelons and much more.

### WHY PRODUCE?

When people think of garden centers, they think of living product, which includes produce. And, as I mentioned already, produce is how most garden centers got their start, although some surely added a produce section after establishing the garden center. Either way, a produce department has many pros and cons.

We all know about those down times at the beginning of the year and in between the spring and fall rush. Produce is a great way to offset that a little. "In June we'll have people come in for their bedding plants, and they'll pick up some tomatoes or a watermelon," said Ortega. "So it kind of supplements our 'off season' in mid-summer when people are thinking of fresh fruits and vegetables. It gives them another reason to come back."

Sure, it's great to get that extra business during slow times, just as long as one remembers the difference between prices of produce and plant material. "Dealing with the lower margin can be very difficult for garden centers," said Sickles. "But I ▶

*Above:* Tom's Farm Market's new build, which contains air-conditioned structures, helps keep its produce fresh.

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think the advantages of that extra cash flow is great.”

“You really have to move a lot of product when you’re getting \$.79 or .89 per lb. for onions or potatoes, whereas a flat of flowers is \$14 or 15,” said Manning. “Produce is a smaller sale item, but you have to sell a lot of it to keep it fresh and keep it moving.”

**PRODUCE VS. PLANT MATERIAL**

Produce may seem like a no-maintenance item, which for the most part is true. You don’t have to water it or fertilize it or do all of those other tedious things you have to do to your plant material. But, display is just as important for produce as it is for plant material. “You can take care of plant material and keep the shelf life pretty good,” Sickles said, “With produce, you can’t make it any fresher as the day goes by; you can’t make it greener with fertilizer or anything like that.” No one wants to buy anything from a place that carries dead, rotting produce, even if it is sitting next to a fresh

ripe piece of fruit or vegetable. It just looks bad.

One of the most important factors in produce vs. plant material is the shelf life. While plant material can have a varying shelf life of maybe a couple weeks, produce can perish in anywhere from two days to a week, so dealing with the varying degrees of shelf life can be very difficult. “Buying in produce is a lot like buying plant material because they are both perishable,” said Ortega. “You’ve got to buy it and turn it quickly.”

**SOME ADVICE**

Heed the warnings: If you thought merchandising and selling plant material was difficult, don’t think produce is going to be any easier. “It takes a lot of work to run the produce market right,” said Ortega. “It takes numerous guys to set it up in the morning and make sure everything is clean. I often take a look at our 10-acre nursery and then our little farm market, and I realize [the market] takes a lot of work.” So, make sure

**Top:** Even a small produce section, such as this one at Nick’s, can provide a good profit in the “off season.” **Bottom:** Nick’s buys in locally grown product to ensure freshness.

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you have the man-hours and appropriate help.

Another thing to keep in mind is foot traffic. Take a look at the average number of customers you have every day. "We have customers in here everyday, others three times a week and quite a few once a week," said Sickles. "We maintain tremendous foot traffic." And, you need good foot traffic to sell fresh produce. "Garden centers planning to leap into the produce business should realize they need more frequent customers and foot traffic in order to support the freshness of the product," continued Sickles. "At a garden center in the middle of suburbia, it's a good idea, or if they have constant regular [customer] flow that's fine too. But if their business is the weekends they could get in trouble because they won't be able to sustain the freshness of the Monday-through-Thursday period."

To increase foot traffic and for many other reasons, Tom's rebuilt its facility approximately eight years ago, adding new Nexus greenhouses where previously openness had reigned. "We were an open-air market, and we were worried customers were going to be disappointed with the closed, air-conditioned design," said Manning. "But the air condition helps tremendously with the shelf life of the produce, and it isn't stuffy even with the doors closed, which is what we were worried about." The new design also helps tie their departments together to look like one whole store while having separate areas. A bigger and better facility usually makes customers happier, if the design is right.

So, how do you get customers to come in more frequently for your produce? Ortega says the key is patience and time. "Be patient for the first couple years because it is slow to establish," he said. "The hardest thing I had to overcome was getting people to return and make several visits a year in the first few years."

So, if you're willing to put in the effort, a produce department could be a profitable part of your business. It could be something

your customers come in for every week, and just think of all of the other product they will see while they are there — gifts/collectibles, plant material, trees and shrubs, fresh cuts and all of the other product that is making

yesterday's garden center today's one-stop shop. 🌱

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