



Looking for Linens

Can you find linens in a garden center? Should you be able to? Linens can be that untapped market that ties everything else together.

By Mackenzie Gaffney

You already know that any time you can bring people into your store it means more money, but have you thought about using more than plants and fertilizer as bait? Many garden centers now carry home décor and gift items as a regular part of their offering. What about other items? What about products that are not usually considered garden products...things like pet supplies and gourmet food? These kinds of ancillary categories are proving profitable for garden centers around the country.

"Developing Markets," a monthly series that will appear in each issue of Lawn & Garden Retailer, will profile eight of these potential new markets, giving insight into the health of the market, relating how other garden centers have mastered the category and profiling some of the best new products in the category.

- January: Pet Supplies**
- February: Gourmet Food**
- March: Tabletop**
- April: Linens**
- June: Stationary**
- July: Personal Care**
- August: Jewelry**
- November: Collectables**

The linen market is like no other we have covered thus far in "Developing Markets." For this one, there should be a sign that reads "Caution: Use baby steps." The reason I say baby steps is because you will rarely find an entire section in a garden center that it is devoted exclusively to linens. You will more than likely find linens integrated in other displays or used to enhance other ancillary products. But baby steps are being taken, realizing that this market provides the means to making the rest of your product offerings complete. Then, your store can really be the one-stop shop for creating the outdoor room.

TEXTILES 101

Textiles are a jungle. Between woven, non-woven, apparel and home; one could get lost with the detail of finding the right information that is pertinent to developing this market in garden centers. Home furnishing textiles is a good place to start. Keep in mind those baby steps. There are specialty retailers devoted to this market that can be guides for implementation on a smaller level, such as in your garden center. In August 2004, *Home Textiles Today* came out with its market research of the "Top 50 Home Textile Retailers." Of the top 50, Pottery Barn, Pier 1 Imports, Bed Bath & Beyond, Linens 'n Things and Luxury Linens were the top five home textile specialty retail-



ers and for good reason. Pier 1 Imports does one thing exceptionally well, and that is capturing the feel of the world traveler. So it shouldn't be a surprise that the Middle Eastern/Indian flare is popular in home textiles, and most products are authentic, coming straight from India.

India's top manufacturer in the home textiles industry, Welspun, exports 70 percent of its product to the United States. In 2004, Welspun had \$82 million in sales. In fact, the top three home textiles manufacturers in India export 70 percent or more of their product to the United States. In today's market-

place, when so much of our production is going off-shore, it's not really news that the United States is the majority of Welspun's buyer base. On a positive note, the cultural influence foreign manufacturers have on the products will be of benefit to you. People like to consider themselves cultured, even if they can't, or don't, leave their hometowns. Furnishing the home with tabletop and linens or buying rich gourmet food to set the mood — creating an atmosphere of another world — is easy if all the right components are present. *Home Textiles Today* also commented on this continuing

Lexington Gardens, Newton, Conn., has given linens its own space.



trend, “Globalism also influences fashion and home but not in direct references. Designs, patterns and color can be slightly exotic.” Just because you are a garden center doesn’t mean that you can’t provide a sampling of other worlds to your customers.

TEXTILES STATESIDE

Sometimes, though, we just want to be at home. Buying linens that are rich in color and texture may not be suitable for your customer base. Lexington Gardens, Newton, Conn., devotes 8x8 feet to linens. Lexington has been providing linens for Newton for the last 20 years. Knowing its customers, it tries to find a mixture of linens that are not too country and not too New Yorkish.

Many popular designers, such as Ralph Lauren Home and Liz Claiborne Inc. have made their way into the home furnishing market, which can provide the quality, brand and price point that will make linens a profitable addition. Even though well-known names such as Ralph Lauren are sold at the major department stores, you can offer a more varied selection and devote more time and energy to the product than a big box store. Some home textiles manufacturers have developed relationships with the tabletop manufacturers to license their designs to create

matching sets. This provides an opportunity to create a theme(s) with table-tops and linens, and you can get creative with your displays.

DISPLAY

As mentioned earlier, you will probably find it easier to integrate linens into your other product displays. Some linens that may fit well in your garden center are tablecloths, napkins, hand/guest towels, placemats, runners and pot holders.

Keep in mind that any furniture you have can be accented with a pillow or blanket. None of the garden centers I spoke with integrated local artists into their linen department, but this is a viable source for products. Think of knitted/crotched napkins, dishtowels, blankets and quilts. There are plenty of hobby knitters, quilters and crotchers, who never thought of selling their work but make more dishtowels than they have dishes and not enough closets and couches to store all their blankets.

COMPETITION

It is funny how little things change from industry to industry. The competition discussed in the tabletop “Developing Markets” (*Lawn & Garden Retailer* March 2005) is the same challenge linen specialty retailers face — remaining in the game against the big box stores. But the specialty home textile stores know that they are offering something that the big boxes don’t. Those specialty stores realize their customers want quality that’s affordable and something they won’t find at the Jones’ house down the street. As you know, always think of your customers and what type of linens they will embrace. It may be an opportunity for you to bring some of the larger world to your town or something that enhances the motif that is already present. Remember the baby steps, a ♦

The Lazy K House at Orchard Nursery and Florist, Lafayette, Calif., has taken many steps over the years to integrate linens into its product selection. I took the opportunity to speak with the buyer and manager for The Lazy K House, Anne Mercer, to find out what’s important when it comes to this developing market.

How long have you been stocking linens?

Since the store began about 30 years ago. I have to be honest — linen is not a huge part of our business but it is almost 6 percent.

What made you decide to add linens?

It is a wonderful addition to our product mix. It is something that can be an extension from home to garden. I just think it is a necessity to have linens in a retail environment to soften some of the hard goods.

Since you most likely don’t devote a set space to linens, how have you displayed and integrated linens in the store?

We definitely have cross-merchandised, the whole store is very much done that way.

What kinds of products do you sell?

We do some placemats; I focus more on runners because they have more of a multi purpose in the home. They can be used on sideboards, on a table, in the kitchen and dining room...that type of thing. So runners are probably the biggest area for table linens that we have. I do some placemats and napkins, a few tablecloths. But really, with the tablecloths I have tried to focus on outdoor laminated tablecloths, mostly from Provence because they have been really big sellers.

What is your philosophy in choosing products?

Our client base is well-educated; they travel; they have money they can spend. So, they definitely relate to the Provence look because of their world travels. And it is a very happy, wonderful garden look. So it extends from indoors to out. That is a high price point, yet it has been a very strong category for us for a number of years.

What kind of margin do you get with linens?

I try to stay with a 2.5-percent markup, and that is with the landed goods. So I try to encompass the freight within that range so I can stick to my margins.

Who is responsible for product selection and helping customers?

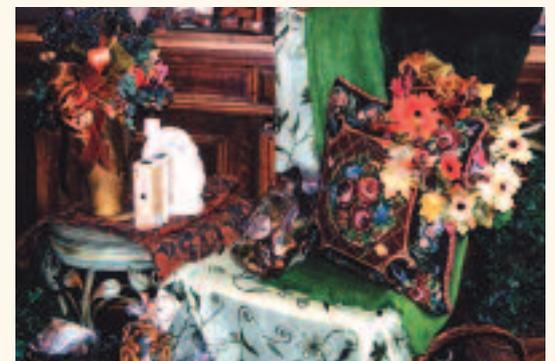
I am in the store. I do sales. I do display work. But more and more of my time is being gobbled up by buying — trying to make those good decisions. Once we got a great staff that could put it all together, I could become less and less important in the dynamics on the floor. But after being here this long, customers are used to seeing me; they like to know I am here — that there is a face behind the choices they are seeing when they come in.

Does this category bring people into the store more often or when they wouldn’t otherwise be there?

We are a destination in the sense that we have customers who come just to the gift shop and don’t go to the nursery, and vice versa. I can’t say that linens drive people in here; it is just not that strong of a category. I have definitely found that there are fewer and fewer wonderful choices out on the market. And it is getting harder to find fabulous, affordable linens. Linens has been a very hard category the last couple of years when trying to find things that are new and exciting, but that people can afford. There are a lot of beautiful French linens out there, but they are extremely expensive. I can rationalize \$89 for a laminated tablecloth for someone because that tablecloth is going to last years and years, and it is easy to maintain — just having to wipe it down and not having to worry about throwing it in the washing machine. It is just a great product for our customers.

Do you go to any gift shows to find linen products?

Most of my time is spent shopping in Atlanta. I go to Atlanta twice a year. This last market I stayed 11 days, but typically it is a 10-day market for me. So I do that twice a year and then I come back and I figure out all my orders. Then, I fill in the blanks with the San Francisco Local Show, and I spend 5-6 days there, scouring that market to find the tried and true, more of the bread and butter things. I go to Atlanta to find the new and real exciting things. 🌸



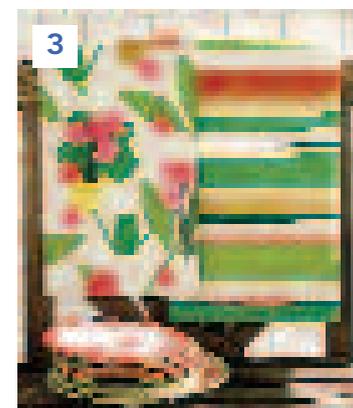
This display at The Lazy K House uses linens to cross-merchandise, which produces a rich, but subtle, display.

DEVELOPING MARKETS

whole world of linens may not be a good idea at first; scope out some of the gift shows, see what is offered and pick up some coordinating placemats or some tiger print dish towels. They say variety is the spice of life, and

taking little steps gives you lots of room for variety.

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1. Pillow

These pillows are available in assorted fabric and trim. The Ravioli Style Pillow, shown, is available in all fabrics and measures 13½x19½ inches. Tee Pee for Me, LLC. (678) 794-2706. **Write in 1584**

2. Table runner

The Veranda Collection includes cloth items that are reversible. This table runner is quilted and features scalloped edges. Hand-washing is recommended. It measures 13½x78 inches. THT Designs. (877) 735-5848. **Write in 1583**

3. Tablecloth

These garden-themed textiles are bright additions for any home. The garden stripe pattern, which fits well into any garden setting and lends a bold look to the table, comes in a napkin and tablecloth. Printed garden placemats and napkins have a combination of colors with watering cans, pots and flowers for the garden enthusiast. All textiles are made of 100-percent cotton and are machine washable. Tag. (773) 697-6296. **Write in 1580**

4. Potholder

The Green Oven Mitt and Potholder and Red Oven Mitt and Potholder come as a set of two. They measure 8½ x 2 x 10 inches. Midwest of Cannon Falls. (800) 776-2075. **Write in 1586**

5. Placemat

Whitman Placemat is an easy-care, 100-percent-cotton placemat that is silk-screened with breeze-blown blades of summery grass. Reverse is solid green. Use then toss in the washer. Design Ideas. (800) 426-6394. **Write in 1582**

6. Napkin

The whole collection from Nicholas Mosse is made of 100-percent cotton, and it uses

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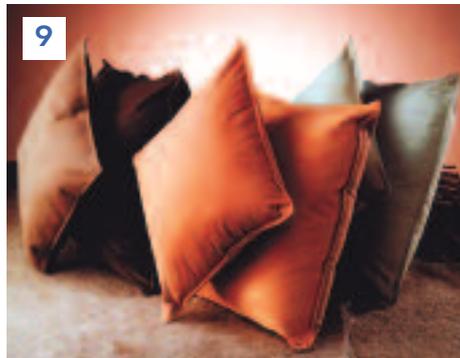
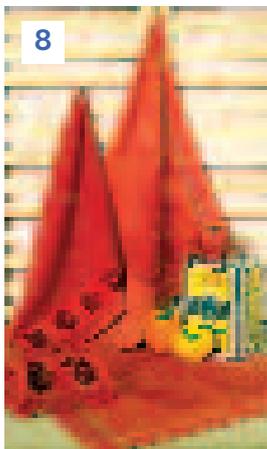
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DEVELOPING MARKETS



a range of patterns across a full range of items. They have pottery and other patterns to choose from. Design Gallery Ireland. (800) 404-2242. **Write in 1578**

7. Tablecloth

This HT01 Topper is available in antique gold, light gold, burgundy, ecru, silver, black and rust, in either a 36- or 60-inch square. K & K Tabletops. (888) 816-1526. **Write in 1579**

8. Towels

These new European designs of Red Hot Peppers come as a coordinating set of towels in flat-woven-jacquard, bordered waffle and thick terry. All towels are 100-percent cotton and made in Belgium. The flat jacquard is good for mini toppers, as well as food/gift-basket liners. Many other vegetable and fruit designs are available. Mierco Inc. (888) 277-8838. **Write in 1581**

9. Cushions

Featured are the Snake Oyster, Snake Espresso and Snake Terrace Cushions. All are available in a small size of 16x16 inches or a large size of 20x20 inches. Lazy Susan USA Inc. (212) 685-0181. **Write in 1585**

RESOURCES

Associations

Home Furnishings International Association
www.hfia.com
(800) 942-4663

International Textile Market Association
www.itma-showtime.com
(336) 885-6842

Magazines

LDB Interior Textiles
www.ldbinteriortextiles.com

Home Textiles Today
www.hometextilestoday.com

Trade Shows

October 16-19, 2005
The New York Home Textiles Show
New York, N.Y.
www.nyhometextiles.com

October 20-26, 2005
High Point Market
High Point, N.C.
www.ihfc.com

January 30-February 3, 2006
Interior Lifestyle USA
Las Vegas, Nev.
www.lasvegasmarket.com

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