

"Consumer Talk" is a regular column appearing in each issue of Lawn & Garden Retailer that examines the issues facing today's garden center customers. Our panel of consumers will provide you with insight into their gardening and retail experiences to help you better understand today's customers' needs.

# Secret Shopping

This month, we asked our panelists to act as secret shoppers at big box and independent garden centers. They compared the customer appeal, customer service, product quality and pricing of the two locations.

## Lori, 50 Fargo, N.D.

"I visited Lowe's, and because it was March in Fargo, N.D., the garden center did not have any bedding plants for sale. A sales associate immediately asked me if I needed help. When the sales associate couldn't give me an answer as to when the plants would arrive, a supervisor was called. I was told their plants are not scheduled to arrive until late April at the earliest. The store was clean, probably because there was nothing in it. The sales associates were efficient.



"A week later, I visited a local garden center. Once again, there were no bedding plants for sale. This shop did, however, have a beautiful display area. Numerous gift items, including candles, pottery and pictures, were for sale and were all seasonally themed. No one asked me if I needed any help.

"I was not approached in either the garden area or the gift area. They did seem busy with other customers who seemed unduly confused."

## Donna, 45 Bethesda, Md.

"I visited Home Depot and a local nursery, which is upscale and pricey but a nice place to shop. In my opinion, Home Depot is the place to go if you know exactly what you want and if they have it. It is somewhat clean, and the garden center is outside. It was kind of hard to move around. The local nursery I went to was very clean, and the workers were everywhere to answer any questions and help customers find what they wanted. I specifically asked for a type of monkey grass. It was sold at Home Depot for \$4.88, but the same size at the independent garden center was \$7.98.



"Everyone is doing yard cleanup this time of year, so mulch is in demand. Bags of mulch can be loaded into customers' cars with the help of employees at the local nursery, but this was not the case at Home Depot. Again, mulch was \$2.99 at Home Depot for a bag and \$4.98 at the independent garden center.

"Harder-to-find plants were available at the local nursery, whereas Home Depot only had the usual annuals. It has been very cold lately, so I think they may have held off putting out some of their plants. The plants definitely looked fuller and nicer at the independent garden center than they did at Home Depot, but you're going to pay for that extra quality.

"Home Depot was much cheaper than the independent garden center. If I am buying in bulk, I would rather go to Home Depot. But if I want something nice to fill pots or something unusual, I will buy at the independent garden center."

## Claudia, 60 Gainesville, Fla.

"All the stores had the basic impatiens, begonias, dianthus and petunias. Four-inch pots dominated and ranged in price from \$.88 at Lowe's to \$1.19 at the independent garden centers.

"The quality can be variable at Lowe's and Home Depot. Watering and general treatment, such as bench overcrowding, under-bench storing or product left on shipping racks too long, takes its toll on quality. Uniform watering seems to be a problem, as well as checking back on some varieties or sunnier locations that might need more frequent watering.

"Staffing at big box stores appears to be barebones, 1-2 cashiers and 1-3 lifters to assist customers. When approaching a lifter with a plant question, some mumbled, 'I don't know.' They were, however, helpful with knowing where products are located. Home Depot did better in informational signage than Lowe's. I like to try new plants but would like to know about growing conditions before I buy.

"At both of the smaller nurseries, they had no shortage of friendly, knowledgeable and helpful staff available. Their plants were not crammed together. They had some choices of color and variety but not the array of colors of standard varieties that were in the big box stores.

"Each store I visited had something interesting the other stores did not have. The combination pots at the big box stores were attractive but looked like they were made with a cookie cutter. The nurseries had individualized plantings in large ceramic containers that were artfully produced. The smaller nurseries overall had better quality and well-watered plants."



## Questions To Consider

- What do you do to attract customers into your garden center during cooler seasons?
- Are your sales associates knowledgeable in plant varieties and care information? Do you encourage them to approach customers who may need help?
- How do you compete with big box prices? What incentives do you have to compensate for higher prices?