



Ask P. Allen Smith

# Winter's the Best Time to Warm Up for Spring!

**Q** What can a garden center owner do during the winter months to get ready for the spring season?

**L**ate fall and winter can be a very busy time in the garden center, not so much in the number of customers coming through the door but in the work that needs to be done to get ready for the upcoming spring season. Here are a few ideas.

## Evaluate Your Performance

As things wind down in the garden center and the year is still fresh in your mind, take some time to do an assessment of your ups and downs. It's always good to jot down notes every week or so and then compile them as an end-of-the-year evaluation, but if you're like me and not that disciplined, it's not too late to do a review. Along with including what sold well and what languished on the shelf, make an assessment of the effectiveness of your marketing plan, whether signs in the garden center were helpful and how well the traffic flowed in your parking lot and within the center on your busy days. Were your employees helpful to you and your customers? Were your displays and special sales effective? Did your promotions, special events and discounts help your bottom line? Use that information as you plan next year's strategies.

## Spruce Things Up

When foot traffic slows down at the end of the season, there's a natural tendency to be less concerned about the appearance of your store. But this is the time to make improvements that are best done while things are less congested. Start with your garden center sign and parking area. This is how people find and get the first impression of your business. You may be so used to seeing the entrance that you may not realize how a fresh sign or an easier way to drive in and park would encourage more people to see you and stop by. The best people to ask are your customers, particularly those who are visiting your store for the first

time. Also, take some time to observe how customers move through your store. Do your displays attract attention to the right areas? Would some signs help them easily find things? Do the aisles encourage them to walk all the way through?

Surveys of garden center customers consistently report that they are drawn to buy plants based on their colors. Consider bolstering the color factor in your store by using large swaths of all-weather fabric. I've found that when customers can see the color themes in fabric, they want to buy plants that echo the colors in the material. Now is the time to make your store more customer-friendly. ▶



Late fall and winter are a great time to assess the latest trends and see what might work in your garden center. Adding succulents to your product mix could be a profitable new venture! (Photo: Hortus, Ltd.)

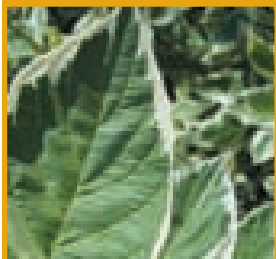


Write in 799



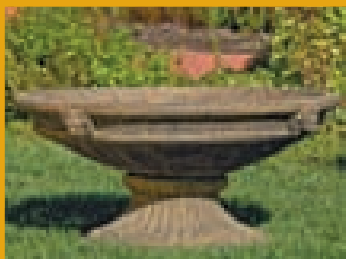
## INSPIRE YOUR CUSTOMERS WITH THE BEAUTY OF BILTMORE™

Offer your customers quality plants and outdoor products inspired by Biltmore and satisfy their desire for the unique and exceptional. Contact our licensed partners below for ordering information. [biltmore.com/foryourhome](http://biltmore.com/foryourhome)



**Capel Rugs**  
Outdoor rugs: 800-382-6574

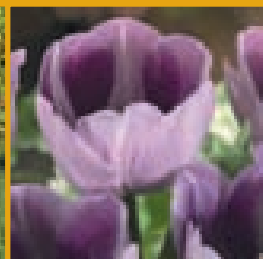
**Cottage Gardens**  
Plants: 877-377-5877



**Fisher Farms**  
Plants: 503-985-7561

**Greenleaf Nursery**  
Plants: 800-331-2982

**Manual Woodworkers & Weavers**  
Metal décor: 800-542-3139



**Netherland Bulb**  
Bulbs: 800-788-8547

**Unique Stone**  
Cast stone: 910-582-5445



**BILTMORE™**  
For Your Home

Write in 759

## PERSPECTIVE

### Schedule Programs

More garden center owners are using special events to draw people to their stores, and they are also becoming well-known experts in their communities who present programs to various groups. Look at your calendar and determine the type and frequency of programs or workshops you'd like to hold at your center. It could be anything from tips on growing vegetables, planting containers or giving homes more curb appeal, to creating outdoor rooms or water features. Choose events that cater to the interests of your customer base. Make yourself available as a speaker to local organizations who would like more information about gardening and landscaping topics. Prepare a dynamic PowerPoint presentation or bring in products from your store to make your talk compelling.

### Prepare Handouts

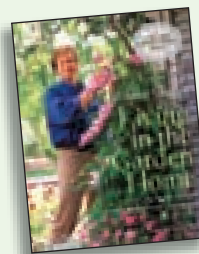
One of the most common complaints from garden center customers is their frustration over finding someone who can answer their questions or give them good information. As you reflect on last year's season, you will probably recall some of the more frequently asked questions. Creating easy-to-read handouts on those topics or adding signs in areas that might provide that information would be time well spent in preparation for next spring. Again, don't assume that what you come up with is clear and easy to understand. Ask customers to review the information and signs, and ask them for their feedback. Offer them a discount on a purchase for their time.

### Keep in Touch

If you have a website or have developed an e-mail list, keep in touch during the winter months with timely tips, advice on protecting plants during the winter or to-do lists of monthly gardening tasks. If your customers see you as a knowledgeable source of local information, they are more likely to visit your store for your products and services.

### Spring Bargains

Few things wake customers from their winter slumbers more than those first warm days of spring. Be ready for them with colorful displays of early-season plants at bargain prices. Find a grower who can give you a good deal on items to use as "loss leaders" for spring sales, such as a tractor-trailer load of early spring-flowering shrubs. While you won't make any money, you will attract customers to your store that will pick up additional plants or supplies while they are there and return for more items later in the season. Get a jump on other stores with a spring giveaway. Let local TV or radio stations know you could talk about spring gardening topics, everything from what to do if there's a late spring frost to how to get your landscape ready for spring. Look for unusual plants to create some early buzz about a special item that is novel, fun and eye-catching.



**P. Allen Smith** ([www.pallensmith.com](http://www.pallensmith.com)) is a professional garden designer, host of two national TV programs, a regular guest on NBC's Today Show and author of *P. Allen Smith's Living in the Garden Home* (Clarkson Potter, 2007) and other books in the *Garden Home* series.

If your customers see you as a knowledgeable source of local information, they are more likely to visit your store for your products and services.