Courting the consumer in 2013

Current garden center trends suggest it’s not just about plants, but lifestyle

By Elizabeth Petersen

Retail garden centers can compete in a tight market in part by observing current trends and predicting future ones. Owners have to ask, “What’s new?” and “What do customers want?” Industry experts and insiders have no shortage of different answers to those questions. However, all would agree that garden centers should consider and accommodate customer needs if they want to experience success.

The 2013 Trends Report from Garden Media Group says 2013 will be about lifestyles and ways to find bliss in the garden. According to this forecast, more gardeners are likely to:

- use nature as inspiration;
- seek spirituality;
- eco-scape their outdoor spaces for sustainability;
- strive for better stewardship of the earth; and
- focus on ways plants benefit health and well-being both indoors and out.

Younger people will support local businesses. Organic, healthy soil and low water plants will be in high demand. Edibles, especially berries, small fruits and herbs, indoor gardening and tiny features will get lots of attention.

Garden centers in the Pacific Northwest are gearing up for these trends in a variety of ways.

According to Gary English, owner of Landsystems Nursery in Bend, Ore.,

Educational workshops are one way garden centers can reach out to consumers, give them confidence, and encourage their creative side. This customer loved the fairy garden she built at a workshop offered by Garland Nursery in Corvallis, Ore.
the key is offering customers the assistance they need to lessen the learning curve. “Anything that helps gardeners garden better is the trend,” he said.

Ways to do that depend on the demographics of the customer base. According to industry leaders, it is about more than just selling plants.

Even as garden centers continue to sell plants, many garden centers are getting creative about their offerings. They’re expanding to provide a more diverse inventory, and different lifestyle opportunities, for their customers.

Focus on food

One such lifestyle opportunity garden centers can provide to customers is food. People love to eat, and more of them care about the quality of their food, where it comes from and how its production impacts the environment. These health-conscious customers are looking to garden center professionals to help them grow a harvest at home.

“It’s all about food in Portland,” said Suzy Hancock, general manager of Portland Nursery, a retail garden center with two locations in Portland, Ore.

Blueberries are hugely popular, she said, as are strawberries, fruit trees and the new Brazelberries™ raspberries. Called Raspberry Shortcake™, the revolutionary, thornless dwarf raspberry combines the desire for a healthy lifestyle with the reality of small gardens. With these plants, gardeners can grow their own fresh fruit in pots on a balcony or patio.

According to English, the trend is as popular in Bend as it is in Portland. “Edibles are a significant request over here,” he said. The only caveat is that customers in Central Oregon have to deal with a short growing season, which English described as “90 days, with luck.”

Landsystems Nursery meets customer needs by emphasizing root crops, blueberries, strawberries, currants, gooseberries, raspberries and a few types of grapes and blackberries.

“Of course, the deer are enjoying this trend as well,” English said. This
creates a market for deer repellants and barriers.

Soil enhancements tackle the problem of sandy soils that have little organic matter, and soils for raised gardens are in demand. Greenhouses and garden blankets, English said, are almost mandatory equipment for gardening success in Central Oregon.

Jamie McAuliffe, owner of McAuliffe’s Valley Nursery in Snohomish, Wash. said today’s gardeners are incorporating edibles into the landscape.

Growing vining foods like Scarlet Runner beans and lemon cucumbers on arbors and obelisks among perennials and shrubs combines the desire for homegrown food with the need for beauty.

Multi-grafted fruit trees allow the home gardener to grow a self-pollinating tree in less space, and herbs are working their way into containers mixed with annuals.

Providing value

The future of retail garden centers will depend on their ability to adapt and change to the new gardening realities, said Brian Minter, co-owner with his wife, Faye, of Minter Gardens and the Country Garden Store in Chilliwack, B.C., Canada.

“The trend is away from just selling plants,” Minter said. “Traditional garden centers are going to have to evolve to something beyond just selling plants. They need to create great and relevant experiences.”

Minter recommends that garden center owners focus on three things to meet the needs of their customers: value, relevance and authenticity.

By tapping into the values and demographics of their customers, Minter said, owners will find ways to be relevant and to provide products and services that meet the unique and personal needs of every customer.

My Garden Nursery is located in the Seattle suburb of in Mill Creek, Wash. Co-owner Jenny Gunderson
described the location as being “on a highway between a high-end golf club and a trailer park.”

Last year, the nursery conducted a survey to assess its customer base. The survey revealed that the nursery serves a high percentage of women between the ages of 48 and 68, with moderate income. More and more young families are also patronizing the store.

The nursery provides a real convenience by running a U.S. Post Office on site. According to Gunderson, some of the customers are “elderly women who use the on-site post office almost weekly and buy something every single time to support us. We call ourselves ‘the fun nursery,’ and people agree.”

It is this type of innovation by both growers and retailers that will save the industry, Minter said.

On the cutting edge

Redefining garden centers to provide more expansive shopping experiences is a worldwide trend.

Minter’s Country Garden Store includes a café, a florist, giftware and more, in addition to plants and plant-related products. This year, the store is moving into ladies’ fashion, even adding dressing rooms to meet the needs of customers. At some stores that have already tried it, ladies’ fashions have brought in more revenue than all soil and soil-related products, Minter said.

Minter points to the newest location of Al’s Garden Center in Sherwood, Ore., as an example of the changing garden shopping experience.

The 10.5-acre, state-of-the-art destination nursery, which opened in 2005, is a dramatic example. In rainy weather, customers are protected by a retractable roof the size of a football field. On nice days, they get to enjoy an open-air experience. In addition to high quality plants — more than 90 percent of them grown locally by Al’s — customers find a large selection of tools, supplies and accessories, including containers, statuary, arbors, fountains and other water features.
Inside, the store offers home decor and gift departments with lamps, dishware, accent furnishing, candles and lotions. Customers can also browse patio furniture and outdoor accessories while enjoying treats and espressos from the coffee shop.

At Portland Nursery, terrariums, aeriums for air plants, and houseplants were the focus during winter. With or without dirt, ecosystems in glass containers with decorative layers of rock and sand, appropriately sized plants and miniature decorations are easy and popular. Striking new begonias, succulents and other plants do double duty as indoor winter displays and outdoor summer displays.

Gunderson sees the same trends at My Garden Nursery. “Terrariums and all the pieces and parts that go with them are going to be what fairy gardens were for us the last few years,” she predicted. Gunderson reports increased interest in hydroponic items too.

“The popularity of terrariums, other aeriums, air plants and living walls demonstrates ways that customer values and relevant solutions can guide the garden center,” Minter said. “Plants are being used in different ways.”

Educating customers
Learning opportunities are widely popular at retail garden centers.

At Portland Nursery, “We love...
information,” Hancock said. She believes that being a valuable resource for the community helps drive long-term success.

The clientele includes both knowledgeable gardeners and others who are new to gardening, Hancock said. Initially, class offerings were geared toward more advanced gardeners, but the nursery has reformulated its lineup to include plenty of offerings for beginners.

Customers can take classes led by expert hobbyists from local plant societies year-round. The garden center reciprocates by hosting plant society shows. An annual apple tasting encourages customers to experiment with less-common apples.

Customers ask questions at a staffed information desk, and the store is filled with signage and handouts that provide information about specific plants and more general topics too.

The most frequently restocked handout at Portland Nursery is a veggie-planting calendar specific to the Willamette Valley. The calendar includes ideas for starting or planting in every month of the year, except December, when the flyer advises, “Collect seed catalogues, pour a cup of tea and plan for next year.”

Classes and workshops at garden centers are a “whole new game,” Minter said. The biggest draw for customers at his Vancouver, B.C. store are seed-starting classes, “a virtual magnet for young people.”

Customer interest in learning how to grow from seed matches the demand for seeds, which constitute a huge growth category at Minter’s store and worldwide, where seed sales are up about 45 percent.

At My Garden Nursery, classes on organically growing veggies and fruit trees remain popular, and the garden center has added brewing and wine-making classes too.

Gunderson is also taking a chance selling purple flamingos as a fundraiser for Alzheimer’s research and has raised over $60,000 for the cause so far.

Learning how to use herbs from chefs and learning to grow herbs at home are both popular at Country Garden Store, but interest in learning how to can homegrown produce is the biggest surprise. “We had no idea it would become so big.”

Workshops, which are more popular than classes, grow and change every year at McAuliffe’s. “Customers are definitely more interested in creating something they can enjoy in their garden,” McAuliffe said.

Wreath-making workshops are often booked right away. For container making workshops, customers get a 45-minute introduction, then build their own containers with the help of the staff.

“These are really great sales boosters, since many customers buy a new container along with the plants to fill them,” McAuliffe said. Popular leaf-casting workshops bring customers to the nursery twice, once to make the casting and again to pick it up.

“We like to mix it up and try new ideas,” she said. For Mother’s Day this year, kids can plant succulents in their old boots.

The bottom line

Innovative products and year-round value are important goals for garden centers, but where to start? The trick is to assess consumer needs and diversify to meet them.

“Go ahead and grab an opportunity,” Minter advised. One “little sleeper” at his store has been the addition of bins of seasonal fresh fruit from the Okanogan Valley of British Columbia. Cherries, peaches and apples, the extra fancy ones only, are snatched up by appreciative customers on their way in or out the door.

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