

Marketing Strategies for Small Specialist Growers

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INTRODUCTION

As the manager of a 1.6-ha garden and plant centre I increasingly hear my customers tell me that they “have stopped buying plants at garden centres”. This paper looks at who these customers are and why this should be. Obviously the majority of the gardening public will continue to buy plants at garden centres but for small specialist growers, the challenge is to attract those disillusioned garden centre customers and to provide for them the atmosphere, the range of plants, and the novelty they are looking for. In particular I shall consider the role of the display garden in achieving this.

TYPES OF RETAIL PLANT OUTLET

The Development of Garden Centre Chains. In the 1970s and 1980s many garden centres existed as independent entities, a proportion producing some or all of their own stock, for example Church Lawford Garden Centre and Bournville Garden Centre in the West Midlands area. In 1990 Church Lawford was bought by the Kennedy Garden Centre chain to give them 13 outlets. In 1996 Bournville Garden Centre was bought by the Wyevale group and in 1998 they, in turn, bought the Kennedy chain, to give them more than 80 centres throughout the country. This process is set to continue so that eventually most gardeners will buy their plants from two or three national chains in the same way that most of us buy our DIY materials and equipment from chains such as Homebase and B&Q.

Hand in hand with these changes have gone changes in the supply of plants by wholesalers. Firstly the process of centralised purchasing, imposed by the national chains, means that the plant range is limited to that produced by what is often a sole supplier. Secondly the A to Z range of plants is turned into a series of promotional items. This process began with plants such as *Scabious* ‘Butterfly Blue’ and has extended itself to whole species such as the Gallery Series of lupins and themed packages such as Bransford Nurseries Pots of Gold promotion, which covers a complete range of yellow-flowered/golden foliage shrubs, trees and groundcover plants are sold as a single promotional package. Garden centre plant quality is excellent and availability national, but all these changes mean that customer choice is restricted so that a garden centre in Folkestone is identical to one in Manchester and that the range of plant material follows suit.

Small Specialist Nurseries. Running in parallel with these developments is what has become almost a subculture of small specialist nurseries. These pop into the limelight at the annual gardening shows, such as Chelsea, Malvern, Hampton Court, and Gardeners’ World, after which, unless sought out, they will be known only from articles in *The Garden*, or listed as suppliers in *Gardening Which*. It is to such nurseries that people who no longer buy plants at garden centres are turning.

The received wisdom for locating a retail nursery is that it should be accessible to a large customer base, near a town, and visible from a main road. This is where the

garden centres are, but not usually the specialist nurseries, which all seem to be in out of the way places, down narrow lanes, and are usually difficult to find. Their customers tend to be dedicated plant enthusiasts who are prepared to seek out such places. Typically such customers will belong to a garden society (either local or RHS) or are perhaps members of The Hardy Plant Society, the Alpine Garden Society, or NCCPG.

The Gap in the Market. I believe that there is a group of customers that lie between the mass market garden centre customers and the out-and-out plant enthusiast and these people could easily be attracted to specialist nurseries. These are people who are not first-time plant buyers and who are looking for something more than the DIY shopping experience being offered by mainstream garden centres. They are the sort of people who go to big gardening shows but who find that this is their only point of access to specialist nurseries. The specialists need somehow to make themselves more accessible.

SPECIALIST MARKETING STRATEGIES

The strategy I suggest, in essence, is to generate a sufficiently high-profile or reputation to attract customers to seek out the nursery. This can be attempted using the following methods:

Shows. From the RHS's Chelsea Flower Show to the much less ambitious Rare and Unusual Plant Fairs, the purpose of taking part in shows has to be publicity and generation of the "wow" factor, so make sure you exhibit your most exciting plants as well as your most profitable lines.

Garden Tourism. This is a developing area which ranges from the highly structured international tours, through organisations, such as Bed & Breakfast for Garden Lovers, to a simple entry in the *Plant Finder*, published by the Royal Horticultural Society. There are many people out for the weekend, a good number of them armed already with the National Garden Scheme's guide to gardens open to the public (the well known Yellow Book), who enjoy the challenge of finding obscure nurseries by looking to see what is listed in the *Plant Finder* for that area.

Books and Articles. Are you a writer as well as a nurseryman? Some magazines are always looking for copy — even if it is only the contents of your catalogue for review. Christopher Lloyd's Great Dixter Nursery profits from the fact that he writes a weekly piece for a national newspaper and Carol Klein's Glebe Cottage Nursery in North Devon must equally benefit from her TV appearances. Beth Chatto's books about her garden in Essex were instrumental in the development of her nursery into what many people claim to be one of the country's best specialist nurseries.

Mail Order and the Internet. Mail order, and its 1990s equivalent of e-commerce, have equal weightings of pros and cons. They overcome the problems of obscure locations and can cover the difficulties of selling very early in the season in February and March. Because mail order customers order from catalogues, the format and look of the catalogue itself takes on a special importance. Some specialist nurseries produce lavish catalogues (Bernwode Plants, Aylesbury), with botanical plates and short essays on plant types (Woottons of Wenhaston, Suffolk), or comprehensive

descriptions of obscure plants (Monksilver Nursery, Cambridge), that encourage fireside shopping. The Internet is expected to play an increasingly important role and has the advantage of reaching an international audience and passes on the printing costs to the customer. But the advantages of mail order must be considered against the disadvantages. Not all plants in an order may be ready at the same time for dispatch; a lot of phoning is involved to organise customers to receive the plants; refunds have to be arranged for damaged and lost orders. These common difficulties make mail order a time-consuming, expensive operation.

Innovation, Breeding, and Collecting. All potential customers are excited by something new so many specialist nurseries have made names for themselves by breeding new cultivars or collecting plants from the wild, for example Ashwood Nurseries for breeding *Lewisia*, *Hellebore*, and *Hepatica*, and the Specialist Plant Unit at Pershore and Hindlip College for the discovery of *Ceanothus* 'Zanzibar'. While the large wholesale nurseries have bulked up and marketed these plants, it is the small specialists that are responsible for these innovations in the first place. In turn many have been able to use their discoveries to arrange financially rewarding deals with the large wholesalers.

The Display Garden. A well laid-out display garden is the ultimate in point-of-sale material, putting the largest coloured label and display board in the shade. Real plants, real size, with real flowers and real smells excite people and that excitement translates into sales. Consciously or unconsciously it is a marketing strategy used by many nurseries, the RHS Garden at Wisley is probably the largest, whose garden displays are bound to stimulate its plant centre sales. One can also think of the Burford Garden and Treasures Nursery at Tenbury Wells, Merriments Garden and Nursery in East Sussex, and the Hiller Garden and Plant Centre near Evesham. The latter is a garden established specifically to generate plant sales, the concept behind it being that everything a customer sees in the garden, plants, fences, seats, ornaments, pots, etc., can also be bought in the sales area. So the customers' experience is not one of "going shopping" as one would if going to a garden centre to buy a specific item, but of being stimulated and excited by an environment — which is also available to take away. It is not aimed at the out-and-out plant enthusiast but at the broader mass of people who have gone beyond their first plant-buying/gardening experience and who want to see more than may be on offer at the garden centre. It is aimed at making specialist products, plants, and ideas more accessible.

THE ADVANTAGES OFFERED BY A DISPLAY GARDEN

Increased Range of Plants. There are a number of spectacular, mainly large plants, that sell very well when the display plant in the garden is in flower, for example *Althaea cannabina*, *Crambe cordifolia*, *Verbena bonariensis*, *Dierama pulcherrimum*, and grass species in general. These plants are not suited to garden centre merchandising because in the pot they are twiggy or coarse-leaved and have no visual impact as young plants. So they have no mass-market exposure — until seen in a display garden.

Improved Ability to Give Advice. A display garden can also provide a real environment where the customer can see exactly what works. Every retailer is familiar with the customer who has a dark, dry, north-facing garden with lots of

trees and wants something that will thrive there and provide year-round colour. All that can usually be offered is verbal advice and possibly a printed plant list. The display garden offers a valuable further step. The display garden also becomes an asset that can be used for workshops, tours, and talks. So customers get a broadening, learning experience rather than a sterile, shopping experience.

Greater Opportunities for Linked Sales. A well organised display garden will be full of plant combinations and juxtapositions that create opportunities to sell multiples, e.g.: orange *Crocasmia* 'Lucifer' with purple *Clematis* 'Jackmanii Superba'; pale blue *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' with the black-foliaged *Aster lateriflorus* 'Prince'.

Ability to Extend Selling Season. Retailers can experience a drop in plant sales in July and August when customers' gardens are full of plants and gardeners go on holiday. But a display garden will attract these very people as tourists in the summer and purchases will often be an impulse affair because the customer has seen something in the garden and "just has to have it".

To make these advantages work for the nurseryman, the obvious extra resources and expenses have to be made available. A 1.5- to 3-ha garden will probably need one full-time and one part-time members of staff to run it although this may be covered by charging an entrance fee. Everything needs to be clearly labeled for customers to know what they are looking at — and in garden this size there may be 1000 to 2000 plant taxa. If customers are to be encouraged to make repeat visits, the garden must change regularly otherwise regular visitors become bored. On a month-to-month basis this can be overcome by issuing a list pointing out plants of particular interest. On a year-to-year basis it means replanting and changing the display to provide totally new items of interest.

CONCLUSION

There is a section of the plant-buying public which is looking for plants, services, and experiences beyond that being provided by garden centres. The specialist nursery, while appealing to plant enthusiasts, may be inaccessible both geographically and in terms of the way the nursery presents itself and sells plants to the public. A display garden can provide a means of opening up the specialist's advantages to a wider public.