Trends in Horticulture©

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TREND #1: SUSTAINABILITY IS THE 5TH WAVE

The most recent trends in sustainable horticulture are:

- Plastic and soilless media were invented in the 1960s with full integration as a matter of regular production practices in the 1970s
- Mass marketers businesses began their growth stages in the 1980s
- The advent of annuals produced in plugs occurred as well in the 1980s
- The introduction of off-shore vegetative annuals began in the 1990s
- The beginning of sustainability has started in the early 2000s

"We're the original green industry, but even BP® has redesigned its logo to look like a flower." —Kerry Herndon

Sustainability should be viewed as a part of your overall organization. Sustainability is not a project that resides outside of your normal business practices. Sustainability will be a driver of innovation throughout your organization.

You and your employees should think and act as though:

- Oil were $300/barrel.
- Water availability was cut by ½.
- Weather variations triple.

Sustainability needs to be integrated into your business. It is not just a buzz word. Your company should have complete transparency. Imagine everything you do in your greenhouse gets printed in the newspaper. With this scenario, how would you act? How would your employees act? How would your customers act? Transparency is occurring due to blogs, internet chat groups, web sites, Facebook, and other similar forms of communication. You need to be prepared for this and have your organization begin to recognize this fact.

You should have100% transparency for all products! Consider it a carbon footprint for your products and services. Just like labels on foods, we need to begin to think of the carbon used to develop and produce the goods and services offered.

There will become a balance between the existing production of products using intensive chemical inputs and the alternative no-chemical method. Integrated pest management (IPM) takes into account this balanced approach to plant production.

There is a consumer trend towards recognizing garden inputs as negative. Chemicals (negative), water use (shortages), energy (expensive), time (scarce), and physical work (unappealing to most home owners).

The nursery and greenhouse challenge is to catch the sustainable virus and position the industry as a "Green Industry." Presently the U.S. horticultural plastic waste is estimated at 385,000,000 lbs/year. The greenhouse and nursery industry is part of this waste cycle. The use of bio-packaging fiber pots developed using rice, peat, paper; coir is the first irradiation of products. The second generation will be of bio-plastics. These bio-plastics are made of renewable resources. The third generation will be of bio-plastics that are also plantable.

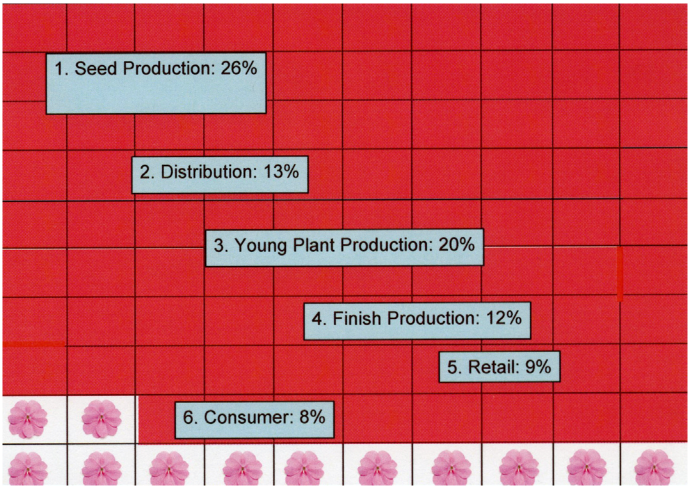

Figure 1. Where did all the Plants go?

Water is a finite resource. We will see more green roofs implemented in commercial and residential applications. Green roofs help to reduce run-off and energy use. Rain capturing systems in commercial applications such as run off retention/percolation as well as home use such as rain gardens and rain barrels are becoming a significant growth.

What is the number one way to increase sustainability in our industry? Reduce shrink!

The challenge and opportunity to reduce shrink in the supply chain cycle is to have improvements in forecasting, merchandising, and accurate information.

Sustainability will reduce costs and increase quality. Sustainability will help to save money.

TREND #2: ORNAMENTAL EDIBLES

Integrating edible plants such as vegetables, fruit, and nuts into the ornamental landscape is taking place throughout the United States in all regions.

TREND #3: DECORATORS

People that are true gardeners — taking the time to learn new plants and to build elaborate gardens are fading. The "new gardener" is decorating their outdoor living space. Decorators are seeking instant gratification. They change their plant pallet quickly. They have little plant knowledge and don't care to learn about plants. They are decorating their outdoor living area with finished patio containers, with annuals, short-term perennials, and tropical plants that die at the end of the season. Decorators seek clear signage at the retail garden center, they want to make quick purchases, keep their hands (and car) clean. They seek plants that are going to provide instant gratification (larger plants, patio ready, quick results). They want plants with instant color.

TREND #4: CONSOLIDATION

The industry will continue to have consolidation — at every level. This is occurring at the breeder, distributor, grower, and retailer, and consumer level.

Consolidation drives lower pricing, and lower margins, puts fewer people into the decision making position, and reduces nonserious players. We are seeing increases in standardization and automation at all steps in the supply chain. The players that have embraced this are raising the standards for professional, business approach.

There is a countertrend to consolidation. Independent garden centers have the consumer perception of having better quality, wider selection, and knowledgeable staff. The pricing is less of a consideration in the buying process. The trend to buy local helps build the independent garden center as the local expert.

The challenge for the green industry is to maintain both large and small growers; have big box and independent garden centers co-exist and for both to be able to be profitable.

TREND #5: YOUNG CONSUMERS

Retail experience for young generation and novice gardeners and decorators:

"My friend going into a garden center has the same experience as my grandmother going into Best Buy."

There is intimidation and confusion with the consumer in the garden center. It is both a challenge and an opportunity to make it easy for the consumer! We need to make it simpler and simpler and simpler "With all the information available now, shoppers are much more ignorant than they used to be about plants."

TREND #6: HEALTHY HOME

Flowers are not just for beauty anymore! There is a new era for plants. The future relationship between plants and people will be improving property values, crime reduction, reduce energy costs (green roofs), moderate urban climate extremes, produce oxygen, sequester carbon, help reduce pollution, improve water management, and reduce noise pollution.

TREND #7: PRODUCT BLENDING

Product blending: is it an annual? A perennial? A vegetable? A woody? Decorators don't care what the plant is; they care about what it does in the short term. Consumers don't care what the plant is. Their focus is on what the plant does. Is it going to shade my house? Does it increase the value of my home? Do I have to maintain it? Does it bloom all summer long? These are the questions that consumers ask and that we must answer in the initial breeding and product selection efforts.

TREND #8: PEST REGULATION

We may be seeing an increase in disease, insect, native/invasive, and importation regulation. If industry and government can work together collectively and become a part of the solution, better results will follow. This will also help reduce the extremist views on importation, native versus "invasive."

TREND #9: NATIVES

What does the consumer want in a native plant? Are they interested (or knowledgeable) about the difference between a native plants versus a low-maintenance plant? Are consumers looking towards natives as the perception is they are easy to grow, low input, low water requirements?

The native plant trend is highly fragmented in the supply chain (see Trend #4). There is not a clear definition of what a native plant is. The segments of the industry that are able to take advantage of this trend are the environmental restoration companies; landscape architects focusing on large-scale restoration; and local, regional, and federal government that is legislating the use of natives.

TREND #10: BRANDING

There is a plethora of branding occurring at the retail garden centers. This is being driven by the growers and by the retailers looking to differentiate themselves from other similar, sometime superior, products by using a brand to establish a foothold in the garden center.

TREND #11: WEATHER WINS

Is the green industry recession proof? Are we depression proof? It appears, from the results in 2009, that weather trumps economy! From all indication, the weather is the most important factor in the sales of plants in the spring.

TREND #12: TURF WARS

The use of expansive turf for the yard is being rethought. There are anti-lawn groups attacking the use of grass as they are high input (water, fertilizer, chemicals). The turf is being addressed from several of the other trends — natives, water restrictions, and garden decorators. Lawns are being equated to "bad" while shrubs, trees, and perennials are being equated to "good."

TREND #13: LOCAVORES

The trend towards anti-globalization is a strong trend that overlaps many of the other trends listed. The opportunity for the grower and retailer is to tell the story of where your plants are grown and how they are grown. Let them know that you are the local expert. The average food is shipped 1,500 miles. Is the average shrub shipped fewer miles? What about the annuals?

TREND #14: LESS ROOM FOR RISK

As a summary, there is less space for risk in the industry. This is an over-arching challenge for the entire industry.

Lastly, how do we attract bright young people into our industry? We can attract them by telling them they can use sustainability to help change the world! I challenge you to find another industry where one can combine art, science, and business. We need to improve our outreach to children and young adults to enter our industry.