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HOLIDAY DÉCOR PG. 20

WATER FEATURES PG. 26

GROWING MEDIA PG. 30



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contents

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:: the regulars

4 **Editor's Note**

48 **Marketplace/Ad index**

50 **Last Look:**
Best buds



:: departments

6 **Retail Revival:**
Get social without social

12 **Industry Outlooks:**
Leadership at all levels

18 **Spotted!:**
Backyard Nature Center



:: special section

AFTER PAGE 16
2023 Houseplant report
See our exclusive research and find out what North American IGCs said about sales, marketing and more.

:: features

20 HOLIDAY DÉCOR
Themes, colors & displays
Three IGCs share their must-haves for hot holiday sales.

26 WATER FEATURES
Find your Zen with water features
Sunnyside Nursery is seeing an increased interest in creating a home oasis using fountains.

30 GROWING MEDIA
Trial & error
For the grower-retailer: 5 steps to running an in-house growing media trial.

36 MARKETING
Peeking behind the curtain
Here's how National GardenBureau's program can help retailers market their plants.

42 BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
Complaints are opportunities
When customers complain, they give you a second chance to keep them.



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Plant people



THERE'S A PHRASE I'VE found myself repeating often over the past four years: Plant people are the best people. It's not a platitude to me — I truly believe it.

In my time as editor of *Garden Center* magazine I've been lucky enough to meet probably hundreds of garden center owners, operators, managers, staff, consultants, suppliers and more, so I feel confident in my opinion that this industry is full of kind, thoughtful and caring individuals.

I'll be moving on from *Garden Center* to take an exciting new position working with growers and retailers elsewhere in the horticulture world, but before I do, I want to thank all of you for sharing your stories with me.

I've been so inspired by the passion you all have, not only for plants, but for people. The genuine care you show for your work goes far beyond anything I've seen in any other industry.

You all give so much every day — to your customers, to your coworkers and to the planet. And you give so much to each other by sharing your experiences, your successes and your mistakes. You truly want to see each other, and your customers, succeed, which is rarer in this world than it should be.

Thank you for sharing your stories, your insights and your passion with me over the past four years. It's what makes *Garden Center* magazine what it is. Your candid conversations have given readers ideas to seize opportunities and let them know that they aren't alone in their challenges.

Change can be daunting and a little scary, but it's also full of possibilities and growth. Garden retail is certainly facing its fair share of changes from new online competitors to the rise of influencers to the diverse needs and demands of a new generation of shoppers. I can't wait to see how you face these challenges together.

I hope you'll continue to reach out and share news of your accomplishments, as well as your questions and comments, in the coming months. During this transition, editorial director Kelli Rodda will be here to listen with open ears. You can reach her at krodda@gie.net.

I wish you all continued success with your businesses, and I hope that while some things will change, the passion you have for plants and people never does. After all, the world is a better place with more plants, and more plant people, in it.

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BY C.L. FORNARI
C.L. Fornari is a speaker, writer and radio/podcast host who has worked at Hyannis Country Garden, an IGC on Cape Cod, for more than 20 years. She has her audiences convinced that C.L. stands for "Compost Lover." Learn more at **GardenLady.com**



Staying social without social media

Connect with your customers in person by helping them solve their problems and engaging them in fun new ways.

FOR THE PAST 15 years garden centers have scrambled to have a presence on social media. Most IGCs are on Facebook and Instagram, and some venture onto TikTok and other platforms. Yet marketing advisors are now talking about the winding *down* of social media, and how businesses need to look to other ways of connecting with customers when the public tires of these internet communities. I'd guess that most IGCs are thinking, "What? We were just getting the hang of it …"

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Fortunately, most of us have also been "building on our own land." Websites and newsletters aren't dependent on the constantly changing algorithms of social platforms, and these are the primary ways we keep in touch with our customers. Garden centers that want to attract and keep younger clients are also using SMS marketing to keep in touch with the generation that pays more attention to texts than to email. Such programs don't promote special sales or push products, but position IGCs as experts in the plant world. Weekly text messages with a timely tip are especially useful because they create relationships with customers based on solving their problems. In addition to useful information, direct texting has the ability to put a particularly arresting photo directly on your customers' phones. People love getting the inside scoop about the amazing blue-flowering shrub or peach-colored *Mandevilla* that has landed, or the special varieties of basil that are now ready to come out of the greenhouse. A photo can be used to help fix current difficulties customers face. In the heat of the summer, many might have lost annuals in their window boxes or pots, and a photo of the fresh shipment of replacement annuals addresses that setback.

Content that's created for texts can also be used in the newsletter and the website. The text contains the basic information and one photo, the newsletter may have two paragraphs and a couple of photos, and the company blog may have detailed information, instructions and additional photos. Coordinating your content marketing makes better use of your time and is likely to attract different audiences.

Beyond those efforts, however, how can IGCs continue to create communities and connections with their customers? For answers, we only need to look back to what we did before the days when the internet changed everything.

Special interest groups. Houseplant



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clubs, garden crafters, vegetable growers and others can be welcomed at a regular time each month. As an IGC, you supply the location and feature a plant or project, but the main goal is to create communities that share their passions, pleasures and problems.

After-hours open houses or a cocktail hour stroll. Offer monthly evening tours of the garden center. Provide a simple beverage; those wishing to avoid serving alcohol can serve a mocktail or sparking water with an herb sprig, and give attendees a printed recipe for a beverage with spirits. Partner with a local restaurant by having them provide a coupon for a discount, free dessert or glass of the house wine. Those who attend your open house can use the coupon that night or in the coming week. Encourage those attending to connect with others for a meal and conversation about plants and gardens.

Provide goodies for the kids. If your IGC has additional attractions that are aimed at the children, parents are more likely to plant shop with you instead of the local box store. Can the kids feed the fish in your koi pond? Do you have a parrot that talks or scented plants that children are encouraged to touch? Perhaps you have a jar filled with penny candy or small carnival prizes at the register so a child can choose something when their parents check out. There are a number of companies that sell small toys for under 25 cents each.

Problem-solving Sundays. Create a small area in your store where a different dilemma is featured every weekend. "Still too cold to plant outside? Here's a seed starting kit for getting a jump on your vegetables." Or, "Rabbits eating your perennials? Try this liquid rabbit repellent on ornamental plants." "Did your peonies fall into the mud last year? Place these grow-through supports on top of these plants now." Engage your customers by asking them which problems you should be featuring in the future.

Social media may not be disappearing soon, but the reality is that people tend to turn away from "the new, new thing" once it becomes the "same old, same old." Businesses need to keep on top of current trends, be flexible about communicating with customers in ways that *the client* prefers, and recognize that since marketing is always about developing relationships, we're well served by returning to face-to-face connections.



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Power to plant more

Power Planter augers can increase sales by decreasing the time and effort gardeners spend putting plants in the ground.

Shoppers might not be thinking about power tools when they walk into your garden center, but with the right education and displays, they could walk out with a solution to their planting pains. Power Planter augers not only help customers plant with ease, but they also encourage more plant sales at your store. By helping customers make the most of the time they have to spend in the landscape or garden, the augers can inspire gardeners to expand their plans and plant even more.

"Customers with an auger will buy more season after season because they have more time to plant now," says Greg Niewold, owner of Power Planter.

For customers who struggle with traditional planting methods due to arthritis, bad backs or other physical limitations, a Power Planter auger can help them safely and efficiently achieve their garden goals. Niewold's own mother is a master gardener who has had eight back surgeries, so the only way she can garden is with an auger. And with Power Planter products, she's able to manage her 5 acres of land.

"She physically cannot stomp on a shovel. She physically cannot bend over and try to jab a trowel into the ground," Niewold says. "So for people like her, it gives them the option to get involved again in the garden."

A local support network

Power Planter products are all made in the USA, giving IGCs direct access to support and service whenever they need it. "IGCs can come directly to us for support and service," Niewold says.

The company has educational videos and other resources available online, and garden centers are welcome to reach out for virtual meetings to ask questions and better understand the products. And if there's anything else IGCs need, Power Planter is always available.

"It sounds cliché, but being a small American manufacturing company, people can just pick up the phone, give us a call and say, 'Hey guys, I really would like something like this.' And there's a really good chance that we have it or we will make it and get it to you," Niewold says.

Making the sale

"One thing that is very key is that nobody is going to walk into your garden center today and say, 'I'm going to buy an auger,' so product placement is key," Niewold says. So he recommends putting Power Planter displays in high-traffic areas where customers with carts full of plants see them on their way to check out.

If a customer is browsing a display but isn't quite sure which one is right for them, all a sales associate needs to do is take a quick inventory of the customer's cart and make a recommendation. If the cart is chock-full of plants for their garden, they'll want to opt for a 24-inch auger.

For a customer who has just a few items, a 7-inch auger is an adequate and budget-friendly option to do the job. And for anyone in between, especially someone who might be skeptical of the product but likes the idea, a 12-inch model is a great option. With that, a customer can plant gallon pots easily or handle their annuals and perennials with ease.

"That understanding from the associate they're communicating with is a huge thing," Niewold says. "I always say that most IGCs are small, family-owned businesses, so they know their customers. So understanding those customers, and what their needs, is key."

For more information: powerplanter.com/wholesale





Power Planter displays are silent sellers, showing customers how the augers can help them accomplish more in less time.



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BY LIZ LARK-RILEY
Liz Lark-Riley is a writer, speaker and leader who is passionate about growth (for plants and humans). She is senior customer relationship manager at Mahoney's Garden Center in the greater Boston area. Learn more at **mahoneysgardens.com**.



Employees who lead from the middle are passionate about what they do, and they make your operation stronger.

Leading from the middle

Managers at all levels of your garden center can improve both employee and customer experiences.

LAST YEAR AT CULTIVATE, the wise and wonderful Lindsay Squires of Tagawa Gardens introduced a noteworthy topic for any organization: leading from the middle. Unfortunately, I had a conflict and missed what her panel had to say on the subject. At the time, I was at the top of my small organization, but this year I moved to the middle of a larger organization and I've often wished I had made it to the session.

From the middle, I've gotten curious about different forms of leadership, and I've begun to notice the ways it shows up in organizations large and small. Here at Mahoney's Garden Centers, I've been inspired by Sam, a front-end manager who took it upon herself to create training and onboarding materials to help her team feel more confident. I've become a gigantic fan of Jessie, who consistently strives to support her team and went from cashier to inventory control associate to inventory control

PHOTO © STOCK ROCKET | ADOBE STOCK

Not sure when to lead, follow or get out of the way?

supervisor, leaving a string of improvements in her wake. And I've reflected on the powerful team I worked with at Rockledge Gardens whose contributions from the middle are too numerous to name.

I hope that as we explore this topic together, it will help empower leaders at every level to embrace and celebrate the many forms of leadership that can enrich garden centers everywhere.

Here is what I'm learning:

It's not about titles.

Leadership is about influence, not position or title, and you may have noticed that influence can be positive or negative. A team member whose subpar performance is tolerated influences everyone around them to underperform. On the other hand, a team member who takes initiative, demonstrates compassion and cultivates curiosity along with a willingness to learn will have a very different effect on an organization. For this reason, it's important for owners and managers to recognize that everyone in the organization is a potential leader.

It's about the details.

Managing up from the middle to affect change in your organization is often about noticing and thinking about the details. While it's important for upper-level managers to think about the big picture, middle managers can have an enormous impact on the day-to-day by noticing the small details that can make a world of difference. At Rockledge Gardens, a cashier noticed an issue with mystery plants showing up in the check-out building. Were they on hold for a guest? Returns? Paid for? Who knew? She took it upon herself to devise a simple slip system to make it all clear and the result has led to more confident cashiers and a smoother customer experience.

Jessie, Mahoney's inventory control supervisor, noticed the team needed a better office workspace to do their jobs effectively. When she presented her suggestion to upper management her proposal included a strong case for why this upgrade would improve the business and a design and cost analysis for the project. Details matter, and middle managers are in a great place to notice and act on them. The more you can organize relevant details into any proposal, the likelier it is that upper management will go along with what you suggest.

Those who lead from the middle care a lot.

In the June 2022 issue of *Garden Center*, Leslie Halleck offered sage advice for "retaining your rockstars" and wisely



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John Kennedy

Owner,
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warned owners not to be intimidated by high-performers who act like they own the place. This is a signal that these employees care, not that they are looking to usurp the throne. If someone goes to the trouble of proposing a new system or pointing out how something could be made better, it means that they feel strongly about the organization. This is a good sign because, more than anything else, today's employees want to come to work and make a difference.

Leadership is about compassion. In his book, "Radical Curiosity", Seth Goldenberg asks us to rethink many things, including work. He says, "When an organization's primary focus is extraordinary value creation through human care, it designs an employee experience that naturally delivers customer experiences. The reciprocity of an employee experience and customer experience mirroring and informing each other produces an enormous number of smiles. Real value, real joy, real care always yield revenue. To design organizations of care is wealth generative leadership."

Middle managers can help organizations create value through a culture of care. Those in the middle of an organization often see things that owners and executives miss. Not only are they more likely to have candid conversations with team members at different levels, but they themselves are often responsible for executing or following procedures and policies that those at the top might be exempt from. From the middle, you're in a position to operate from a place of empathy, which leads to compassionate policies that strengthen teams and create powerfully positive customer experiences.

It's impossible to quantify how much I benefited as a top tier leader from the individuals who took it upon themselves to lead from the middle. From creating an intentional culture of appreciation to ensuring that team members were equipped with the tools and systems to feel confident in their jobs, we were able to make dramatic improvements to the employee experience driven by the employees living that experience. And it does, indeed, produce an enormous number of smiles.

Although I missed what I'm sure was an incredibly insightful panel with Lindsay Squires at Cultivate, I did get a chance to catch up with her recently and she summed it up beautifully by saying, "Leading from the middle is about seeing and seizing what is possible in the present, imperfect moment." GC

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BRINGING LIFE TO GARDENS

Wingard's Market is a small family-owned garden center located in Lexington, South Carolina, where second-generation owners Wally and Delores Steinhauser didn't stop at plants. During their tenure as owners, they've added a gift shop, produce market, greenhouse and most recently a Nature Center headed up by their son, Zach. Zach comes from a background in conservation and wildlife biology and has a passion for connecting people with the natural world around them. By incorporating educational aspects, Wingard's new Backyard Nature Center will see folks come to learn and understand how to garden for local wildlife and attract the animals they want to see in their backyards. **— Ashley Hunter**



1.

1. Wingard's Market owner and operators Wally and Delores Steinhauser, along with their son Zach Steinhauser, look to grow their family business by incorporating the educational Backyard Nature Center into their backyard birds and wildlife department.



3.



4.



2.

2. Not only has Wingard's Market increased its selection of backyard bird and wildlife products, it has also increased its selection of native plants that gardeners can use around their homes to attract various birds and pollinators. As gardeners incorporate more plants favored by pollinators like bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, they create a suitable habitat from the comfort of their yard.



5.

3. As the perennials buyer for Wingard's Market, Zach has a bias when he orders plants to sell — the more pollinator-friendly the better! For example, the bright red blooms of Penstemon are the perfect size for bumblebees to fit inside as they find nectar to feed on.

4. The long, tubular flowers that Agastache create are irresistible for hummingbirds and butterflies to feed on during the warm sunny days of spring.

5. Recently, Wingard's Market dipped a toe into the aquatic plant market. Water gardens create habitats with immense benefits for local wildlife like frogs and dragonflies. Zach created a display water garden in 2022, and it has become home to a very charismatic bullfrog named Jeremiah.

PHOTOS: WINGARD'S MARKET



6.



7.

6. & 7. Zach has also taken the initiative to create habitat gardens to use as displays for customers to understand how gardening for wildlife works. He has created multiple pollinator gardens on the property.



8.

8. There are products that can help attract amphibians and reptiles to the garden like Treefrog Houses that make a welcome home for little treefrogs that have come to feast on the insects around your home.



9.



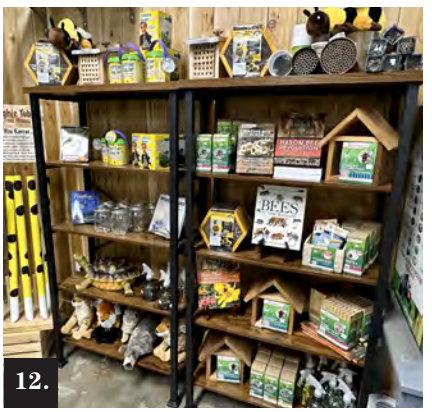
11.



10.

9. & 10. Wingard's Market recently completed an expansion of its Produce Market, creating more space for the newly minted Backyard Nature Center.

11. By incorporating aspects of a formal Nature Center, Zach has created displays that explain the importance of host plants and creating caterpillar habitats for butterflies that visit gardens.



12.



13.



14.

12. & 13. Butterflies aren't the only pollinators that visit the garden. By expanding their line of bee habitat products, Zach educates customers about the different types of native bee species that could call their backyards home.

14. Many visitors to Wingard's Market live on Lake Murray in the Midlands of South Carolina. Drawing inspiration from larger outdoor department stores, the Wingard's team likes to educate folks about the backyard wildlife they could have below the surface like turtles, fish and amphibians by incorporating a native fish tank in the Nature Center.

What holiday decorations should you be stocking?

Three IGCs share their experiences with holiday décor.

By Katie McDaniel







With the holiday seasons just around the corner, it's time to stock up on the decorations consumers want and the must-have items every IGC should offer for the holidays. *Garden Center* magazine spoke with All Seasons Garden Center, Moore & Moore Garden Center and Herbein's Garden Center regarding what holiday trends they've noticed over the past few years.

WHAT THEMES OR MOTIFS ARE YOU STOCKING, AND WHAT HAS BEEN POPULAR?

ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER, NORTH DAKOTA

Jan Heitmann, buyer and designer: Gnomes continue to grow in popularity. We are in the upper Midwest, so gnomes kind of go with our lifestyle up here. We're always stocking classic red with a nice white ice secondary theme. We're more cabin than we are lodge, and people want to leave their decorations up until March, so our customers respond to neutrals, birch and things like that.

MOORE & MOORE GARDEN CENTER, TENNESSEE

Robyn Brown, general manager: Most of what we sell would be considered traditional. The last couple of years we've done well with mid-century modern such as the Shiny Brite collection. Last year we had traditional, flocked, mid-century modern and what we consider a natural tree.

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HERBEIN'S GARDEN CENTER, PENNSYLVANIA Tom Bull, owner: We do a lot of custom decorations, and people have been sticking with classic stuff. Some modern things are also filtered in, but we have a huge repeat customer base that seems to stick with the same items.

HOW HAS YOUR INVENTORY CHANGED OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS?

ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER JH: We continue to stock classic and timeless items. We're always rotating around classic red, sparkle, textures and smells of the holiday. We sell a lot of carved Christmas trees, pinecones and other carved



things. We stock a lot of décor that goes with winter rather than just Christmas as well. Our winters are so long, so people like ice cycles, snowflakes and white decorations. … We grow our own poinsettias. Every inch of the greenhouse is full of poinsettias, which is kind of unheard of up here.

MOORE & MOORE GARDEN CENTER RB: We are doing less whimsical in Santas and children's items. We have stepped up our stems and table décor. This includes non-Christmas items such as candle holders and basic home décor dressed for Christmas. We are also buying less ornaments. We carry specialty ornaments but very few basic ornaments.

HERBEIN'S GARDEN CENTER TB: Our inventory has increased over the past few years. We are stocking a lot more artificial trees and artificial décor.

WHAT COLORS HAVE BEEN POPULAR OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS?

ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER JH: Sometimes our customers are into shades of melon, pink, navy and copper, but they seem to still respond to the classic red, white and neutrals.

MOORE & MOORE GARDEN CENTER RB: We have seen a trend toward gold and blue. Red is still the best-selling color, and we have been doing well with copper and sage.

HERBEIN'S GARDEN CENTER TB: Silver and gold seem to be popular. We sell ribbons, Christmas balls and pinecones in those colors. We use a lot of the pinecones in our custom décor.

HOW DOES YOUR IGC INSPIRE CUSTOMERS WITH DISPLAYS?

ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER JH: We have about a dozen decorated trees throughout the store, tying our main gift area with the garden store. It turns into a little bit of a runway with our Christmas trees, wreaths, garlands, pottery area and outdoor decorations. We try to turn the garden store into a little path of things that tie the holiday décor and gardening together. … We change the lighting during the holidays. The fluorescent lights come down, and the Christmas lights go up. People really respond to light with their days being so short, and not just on trees but also on centerpieces and wreaths.

MOORE & MOORE GARDEN CENTER RB: We set up our trees as they would be in our customers' homes. We have the trees and coordinating home decor adjacent to each other to give them ideas for table and mantle decor. We trim our entry doors, above our display hutches and have it hanging from the ceiling. We are dripping with Christmas. In our greenhouse we always do a large display set for Santa with all the fixins.

HERBEIN'S GARDEN CENTER TB: We set up a lot of displays with artificial trees, and we decorate the trees. We pre-make our wreaths with decorations so people can come and grab them.

HAVE YOU SEEN A SHIFT TOWARD DÉCOR THAT LASTS THROUGH MULTIPLE SEASONS OR HOLIDAYS?

ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER JH: People are different. Some people come into the store and have bought a new house, so they want to start fresh with holiday decorations. Some of our customers just want to come and buy stems. We do a

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER





lot of berries and a variety of faux stems. I source a lot of different ribbons for indoor and outdoor, so that's nice to add texture to a tree or wreath when decorating. We do a lot of custom centerpieces, so a lot of our customers want us to make different permanent arrangements for the home rather than just the tree. Some of our customers have been coming here since we've opened to get that one special ornament every year. There was a young man in here, and he came without his mom because his





PHOTOS COURTESY OF HERBEIN'S GARDEN CENTER



folks have retired. He said, 'I know I'm 31, but I'm still coming for my ornament.' It was so cute.

MOORE & MOORE GARDEN CENTER RB: We have always included items that can be used in multiple seasons. I'd say a majority of our tabletop decorations are things you can use again and again. Multiple season items are a must.

WHAT TYPES OF DECOR ITEMS ARE SELLING WELL?

ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER JH: We sell ornaments, garland, wreaths and candles. We sell lighted screens and tabletop Santas, snowmen and angels. We sell a variety of containers that are made of tin and metal. These containers can be used transseasonally. When I went to AmericasMart this year, lighted things were at the top of my list: lighted acrylic trees, lighted acrylic snowman, lighted plaques, lighted screens, lighted anything.

MOORE & MOORE GARDEN CENTER RB: I would say stems are one of our biggest sellers. We also do extremely well with water lanterns and scented candles. Seeded bird decor sells out yearly, as well as anything that lights up. Anything!

HERBEIN'S GARDEN CENTER TB: Lawn ornaments and artificial deer have been popular. We make custom wreaths, mantlepieces and hundreds of bows. Artificial trees are becoming more popular. GC

GC editor Kate Spirgen contributed to this article.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALL SEASONS GARDEN CENTER





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FIND YOUR *zen* WITH WATER FEATURES

Sunnyside Nursery is seeing an increased interest in creating a home oasis using fountains.

By **Katie McDaniel**

Imagine the sounds of soothing water trickling down, birds chirping in a nearby tree … an oasis of serenity amongst the hustle and bustle of everyday life. People are longing to create such an oasis at their own homes, and your IGC could be the very thing to help them achieve it.

Sunnyside Nursery is located in Marysville, Washington. With water features as a part of their inventory for over 10 years, Sunnyside Nursery is seeing an increased interest in creating a home oasis using fountains.

"We've seen the interest in water features increase, especially in the last year or two," says Nicole Phillips, director of marketing. "That category for us is up 20% from last year, which is still a big jump from the previous year. We keep listening to demands and things are getting bigger, more volume. It started as a simple thing for outdoor spaces, and now, it's really niche. A lot of people are looking for them."

Larger fountains have gained popularity with Sunnyside Nursery's customers. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers are home more — working remotely or with hybrid schedules, and they care about investing in their private spaces. Sunnyside Nursery is selling more large fountains because people are willing to invest in them.

"We are seeing an older demographic range buy these fountains," Phillips says. "They're not necessarily new homeowners. They're more established people who are probably in their forever home, or they are people who have retired and

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY SUNNYSIDE NURSERY



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have more disposable income. They've established their gardens or outdoor spaces, so a fountain is the next step to take it to the next level."

Fountains that have three to four tiers and spill from one bowl to another are selling well. These types of fountains are usually concrete, weighing around 600 pounds, and feel more permanent in someone's landscape.

Lighting is important for water features. People want them to look stunning both at night and during the day, so Sunnyside Nursery looks for fountain designs that have built in lights. Besides lights, they look for fountains that incorporate a variety of enhanced features such as metal finishes and copper edges. These small details make a difference to a customer who is looking for something other than concrete.

Sunnyside Nursery sets up a fountain of each design around the garden center. They order about 25 different styles and provide several displays with plants surrounding the water feature so customers can envision what it would look like in their own space.

"Customers want to see how the fountains operate," Phillips says. "We leave the rest packed-up because it's a lot of work for garden centers to set-up, then tear down and take it to a customer's house and set it up there. It's a lot of labor. … The rest are ready to get loaded in a vehicle and delivered to the customer for installment. It makes things more efficient on our end."

After a customer picks out their fountain, Sunnyside Nursery assists with delivery and installation. They make sure the water is flowing properly and will assist if things go wrong.

"We try and make it a continued relationship with our customers instead of just, 'here's your fountain. We'll never talk again,' Phillips says with a laugh.

For IGCs looking to sell water features, Phillips recommends starting by finding a great vendor. "Our vendors' websites are now easier for us to point customers to, so we don't have to do all the work," she says. "We can tell our customers to go check out the website, and they can see a video of the fountains operating in the day and night." This removes some of the burden off the garden center as a retailer.

Phillips also notes the importance of having a small range of inventory to satisfy all





the different customers' needs. Having several styles and multiple quantities of each style is helpful in terms of labor and efficiency.

Sunnyside Nursery also allows their customers the option to pre-order items. They can use the vendor website to view catalogs and pick out their water feature. Then Sunnyside Nursery can order it.

"Being open to the pre-order or special-order situation is really beneficial to everybody," Phillips explains. "Customers feel like they're winning because they get a 20% discount. We have to do less labor, and the vendors really help support that in terms of resources and materials."

Sunnyside Nursery also offers bubblers, a smaller water feature in which water bubbles up from the center and spills into a bowl. Bubblers are perfect for customers who don't have large yards. They can be used inside houses, apartments and placed on patios.

"The sound of running water is really what's attractive to people, whether they're indoors or outdoors, so we do have some indoor fountains," Phillips says. "We see both categories move, but the outdoor ones get a lot more traction than the indoors."

Adding a water feature to a home, garden or patio could be the very thing that a customer needs to create a serene space at their home and improve their mental health.

"It's usually about increasing the ambiance, creating this oasis in your outdoor space, and the sound is really pleasing and peaceful," Phillips says. I think that's usually what draws people, the constant motion and sound in their garden. … Water features go hand-in-hand with the gardening industry, being outside and feeling those natural elements, whether it's sticking your hand in the dirt or listening to moving water. I think it really does a lot for us internally and mentally. It's a personal sanctuary to reset and have all your senses activated." GC



TRIAL & ERROR

Running an in-house growing media trial is possible. Here's how to do it in five steps.

Written by
Chris Manning

According to Ohio State University sustainable greenhouse and nursery specialist W. Garrett Owen, grower-retailers doing their own growing media trials is both doable and something they should do.

"It's totally doable and it's probably one of the things most recommended [to growers] before they make a switch with a substrate or a new mix," Owen says. "This will give them, or their team of growers, an idea of how the substrate works, how it performs and how the plants perform and their cultural practices are needed, if any."

He notes that they need a control (the substrate they are already using) to establish a baseline and he recommends growing one plant per pot, but grower-retailers should also consider trialing containers with combinations of plant material.

"Have at least six pots of each new substrate for each bedding plant species and cultivar," he says. "Try to incorporate different container sizes too to see how it works with different pot filling machinery you have." Here are five steps Owen recommends when embarking on an in-house growing media trial.



For a proper growing media trial, growers need to properly label pots and keep accurate data throughout the process.

PHOTOS: W. GARRETT OWEN

STEP ONE:
Know why

Owen says the first step is to know why a trial is being done in the first place.

"Is it because you're not happy with the performance of your current mix or is it price-driven," he says, noting that both are valid reasons for considering a switch. General plant

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performance, availability and sustainability are other common reasons for switching up growing media, Owen says.

STEP TWO:
Obtain the necessary materials

After figuring out your "why," Owen says it's important to look at products currently in use and find ones with a similar profile. For instance, if a grower-retailer is using peat-lite and is interested in wood fiber, then look for a new substrate that has wood fiber in it. Contact manufacturers to talk to a sales rep and/or a technical representative about trials.

"In some instances, they will provide some samples that you can physically see," Owen says. "It may not be enough to produce a trial, but it's a place to start."

Trade shows are other places growers can obtain samples, he says. Companies and university extensions can also help grower-retailers determine the size of a trial.

STEP THREE:
Setting up the trial properly

To get started on a trial, Owen says it's vital to label or tag the containers clearly with the substrate and plant material.

"I know, in some instances, growers will create blocks of substrate treatments in a certain section of the greenhouse and not label everything or tag each container," he says. "Overall, it's about documentation. If you start off right, by documenting everything you're doing and have someone dedicated to keeping track of what's happening, you're being dedicated to seeing if making the switch is the right decision."

This goes hand-in-hand with getting the actual plant material in the greenhouse and setting parameters for the trial, he says. Blocking pots in the trial is usually an efficient way to organize it so irrigation will be more uniform.

They can also place properly labeled pots amid their non-trial plant material to see how a new mix or substrate performs within normal growing conditions and cultural practices.

STEP FOUR:
Run the trial

When running the trial, Owen says proper data collection is a must.

"Know the actual start date of the trial," he says. "In terms of knowing what substrates are being used and in what containers, label them and number them.



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So, for instance, you'll know that substrate X is in containers 1-50, substrate Y is in 51-100. And I'd encourage growers to start off by using a 1-2 dilution test or saturated media extraction test so they have a baseline of what the pH and EC is of the substrate is prior to planting." Owen says there is a free tool online at e-GRO's **fertdirtandsquirt.com** that Owen and Dr. Brian Whipker from North Carolina State produced that shows growers how to do those kinds of sampling procedures. Substrate companies can help too, he says.

As the trial goes on, Owen says to monitor pH and EC weekly using the PourThru procedure. (The same resources mentioned above can help with those tests. A pH/EC meter is also recommended.) Monitoring light, temperature and what chemicals are used are noteworthy to document. A PGR drench, for instance, can be tested in a trial, but should be its own subgroup in the trial, Owen says.

He adds that grower-retailers should take photos when they do weekly testing so they can see a progression of plant growth as the trial goes on.

"They can take either a single plant photo or single and group shots so that they can refer back because they may not have time to take observational data and notes," Owen says. "Growers are busy and they may forget to write down that leaves are turning yellow. Photos can help them jog their memory after the trial has been performed."

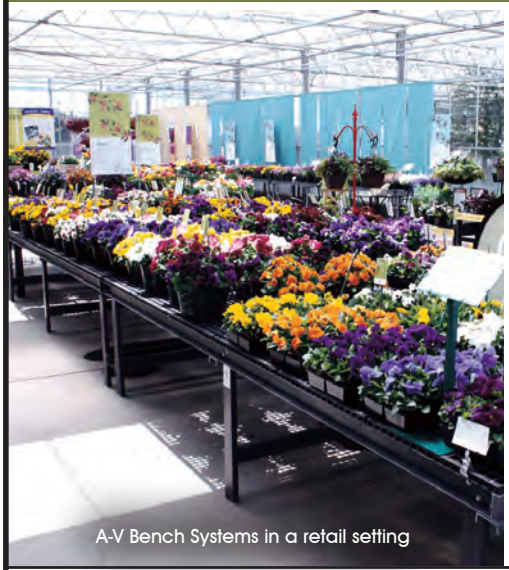
STEP FIVE:
Make an informed decision

When the trial is completed, Owen says to compile data collected (perhaps inputting it in Microsoft Excel and plotting it) and see how pH and EC levels varied over the course of the trial. That information, combined with staff observations, photos, product price information and other notes, is the best way to make the decision about whether to make a growing media switch.

"'How does this actually compare to our control?' is the question you have to ask at the end of the trial and how plant growth or finished plant quality compares," Owen says.

"Look at the photos. See how your plants grew in the different substrates you trialed. Are they similar quality or superior to what you were growing before? And does it make sense financially after crunching the numbers? Line everything up at the end to make a choice." GC

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PEEKING BEHIND the curtain

Here's how National Garden Bureau's "Year of" program can help retailers market their plants.

By Sue Markgraf

Ice Cream Mix from Harris Seeds – 2023 Year of the Celosia

I am always impressed by the marketing programs and information that Diane Blazek, executive director, and her team produce at National Garden Bureau (NGB).

The organization literally gives growers and retailers "news you can use" to market plants and products. You can lift the information as is or shape it to suit your company's messaging and communications outreach.

Among my favorite programs heading into spring, NGB publishes its annual "Year of Plants." Six plant categories include species, types and varieties, downloadable presentations, photos, how-tos, history and more.

The 2024 plant classes will include Angelonia (annual), lily (bulb), squash (edible), African violet (houseplant), hosta (perennial) and buddleia (shrub). The current plant classes include celosia (annual), amaryllis (bulb), broccoli (edible), orchid (houseplant), rudbeckia (perennial) and spirea (shrub).

Curious minds want to know the "Year of Plants" backstory, so I caught up with Blazek for a Q&A.

How large is NGB's membership?

Diane Blazek: We have 159 members ranging from breeders to brokers and growers to retailers. We also have many authors, communicators and podcasters. This is a record number of members in our 103-year history.

When did NGB start the "Year of Plants" program?

DB: Back in 1980, we began with just an annual and an edible. We were the first in the industry to create a "Year of" program. The idea was to bring attention to a plant class that was easy to grow, popular, had many varieties and was an area where breeders were actively trying to improve. That still holds true today.

How have the plant categories changed over the years?

DB: Although the program was consistent for 30 years, it has changed dramatically over the past decade. Part of the reason is that our membership has expanded dramatically as well. Whereas we used to be an organization catering to seed breeders and sellers, we now cover much more of the horticulture market. About 10 years ago, we started considering annuals that were vegetatively propagated for the program. Then we added a perennial category, which then led to a bulb category, then a flowering shrub and now a houseplant category. This is a decision made by our board of directors and based on input from members.

Why are plant categories designed as "umbrellas?"

DB: We wanted more of an all-encompassing "Year of" program so that breeders, growers and retailers can customize it to fit their own product assortment. This way, a much broader audience can take advantage of the program.

Who determines what plants will be included?

DB: Our members determine the "Year of" crops by popular vote. Every three years, we survey our members as to what classes should be featured over the next three years. We provide them with five or six choices, recommended by our board, in each category and the top choices win. While we know the "Year of" crops a few years in advance, we only release that information to our members 11 months in advance, the industry six months in advance and to the public two months in advance.

Are marketing needs of growers considered when determining plant selections?

DB: Very much so! We are not picking crop classes that are difficult to grow or difficult to find, or varieties that are not easy to obtain. These classes are just as easy for the grower to grow and find as they are for

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Cherry Brandy Rudbeckia from Park Seed – 2023 Year of the Rudbeckia

the consumer. I'll give an example for our shrub for 2024, which is the buddleia. We are all aware that the butterfly bush is on the list of invasive species in some states. Part of our mission for 2024 is to educate all points in the chain of distribution, including garden communicators and consumers, that the newer varieties are sterile and are a very good alternative to the older varieties that are considered invasive.

Do consumer trends factor into the selections?

DB: Yes, definitely. For example, if our members are looking at crops to choose from and see some that are not good sellers or just passé, they are not going to vote for that one. We do want to highlight plant classes that are already popular and that the breeders also see as an area of expansion and improvement. In looking at this year's annual – celosia – we have seen many new and unique varieties brought to the market in recent years, like Dragon's Breath, the Gekko series, Flamma Orange, Kelos Candela and others. It's exciting to see how many unique traits breeders are putting into these newer varieties.

Retailers may notice their grower suppliers selling "Year Of" plants. Why should growers incorporate the "Year Of" information in their marketing communications initiatives, education programs and client events and activities?

DB: It's free and easy. When presenting programs for the next year, growers can use this program to bring some excitement to the featured varieties. We have stats that show the sales of those featured plant classes do increase in both the year of promotion as well as the year after. It is a super easy way to

2023 "YEAR OF PLANTS" SELECTIONS

- Annual – Celosia
- Bulb – Amaryllis
- Perennial – Rudbeckia
- Houseplant - Orchid
- Shrub – Spirea
- Edible - Broccoli





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take advantage of a national program that will increase sales.

"NGB provides a myriad of marketing tools that can be used by retail and growers alike," says Denise Mullins, director of product information at Smith Gardens, Bellingham, Wash. "I mainly use the 'Year of Plants' to have internal conversations with our sales teams and customers about potentially increasing production on certain crops and programs."

Blazek says the NGB's member experts provide the program's growing information, and its breeder members write the articles.

"National Garden Bureau's promotions reach a large consumer gardening audience," she says. "With 103 years under our belts, we have a good reputation among consumers of providing quality, unbiased information." GC

FOR MORE INFORMATION about the "Year of" program, visit NGB online at **ngb.org.**

Sue Markgraf is a reporter, editor and journalist with more than 30 years' experience in horticulture and agriculture communications. She is founder and president of GreenMark Media.

2024

"YEAR OF PLANTS" SELECTIONS

- Annual – Angelonia
- Bulb – Lily
- Perennial – Hosta
- Houseplant – African Violet
- Shrub – Buddleia
- Edible – Squash

"YEAR OF" PROGRAM BENEFITS FOR GROWERS

- A neutral non-profit organization does the promotion.
- Does not push a specific variety or brand – a win-win for growers.
- NGB member experts provide growing information. Breeder members write articles.
- There is no charge for growers to use the information. The articles, stories, blogs, logos, photos, signage, etc. are written by professionals and free to download.

"YEAR OF" MARKETING PROGRAM TIPS FOR GROWERS

- Educate sales staff on the program and provide marketing collateral.
- Use the provided logos in their catalogs and on their websites.
- Use marketing materials in trade show displays.
- Showcase varieties at summer trial events.

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By John Tschohl

Complaints are opportunities

When customers complain, they give you a second chance to keep them. Learn how to not miss out on this opportunity.

How many times have you heard your peers spout off: "I hate complaining customers. They're annoying whiners who are looking to get something free. I wish they would just go away."

That's how many business owners, executives, managers and employees — not exclusively green industry professionals — view clients who lodge complaints about the products or professional services they receive from contractors, vendors or service providers.

However, have you ever considered there's an upside to customers who complain?

When customers complain, they are giving you an opportunity to do better — to be better — by pointing out deficiencies in your operations. In the process, they are providing you with data you can use to identify areas with issues that you need to address.

Complaint department

If you receive few complaints, that doesn't necessarily mean you provide flawless service. Actually, it might mean clients who have experienced problems with your products or service chose to do business elsewhere. Research studies show that, because of poor customer experiences, 50% of clients switch companies to pursue services or products elsewhere. Studies also show that 95% of customers who have had a bad experience do not complain. Instead, they simply leave and find a new provider.

Defecting customers have a major impact on your bottom line. A 5% reduction rate can increase your profits by 5-95%. That is due in large part to the fact that it can cost five times more to attract new customers than it does to retain current customers.

Are you listening?

Research indicates complaining customers are overwhelmingly loyal and sincere. They want to continue doing business with you if you set things right. The first step you must take is to make complaining easy.

Many companies solicit complaints through surveys — which can be costly and time consuming to do correctly — but then do nothing with the results. Instead of using that feedback to develop strategies and establish a plan of action to prevent similar complaints in the future, they often let it lie dormant in a computer file. When not used to their fullest, surveys are a waste of your time and money.

Preventive measures

Complaint prevention is the foundation of quality service for any business, whether you grow a plant or you're a manufacturer or vendor. When a company's leadership or management teams fail to recognize complaints as opportunities, then employees and frontline workers follow suit. More often, that will lead them to choose to run and hide rather than deal with a difficult situation or an irate client.

Therefore, you must train employees in the techniques of dealing with complaints, whether it

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is in person, on the phone or by email. When they do so quickly and to the customer's satisfaction, it is magic because your retention and referral rates increase, and your service improves exponentially.

When customers complain, they are giving you a second chance to keep them and their money coming back to you. Remember, getting new customers is an expensive task. Retaining them should be one of your company's top priorities — from the ownership down to the employee manning a shovel on a sidewalks crew. When customers complain, thank them, resolve their issues and use the information they provide to improve what you do and how you do it. GC

John Tschohl is the founder and president of the Service Quality Institute – the global leader in customer service – with operations in more than 40 countries. customer-service.com.



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Setting the Culture for Your Plants



When I accidentally stepped into the gardening world a little over 20 years ago to help a friend create a gardening television show, I knew nothing about plants or soil biology. We would tape excellent how-to-do segments and visit a beautiful garden center the next day, and one of our staff would ask me to identify a plant. I would fail, and they would say, "We featured this plant yesterday!"

I've learned that it is the way my brain works. To remember how to care for plants, I relate it to raising children. The most straightforward process for me was to be very aware of setting the culture, reacting patiently, and following up with care and encouragement.

As the options for soil products have changed dramatically over the last 20 years, retailers have had to think deeply about the many possible selections.

Here are a few things to consider when selling living compost-based soils.

1 Does the company have 3rd party approval from the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI), The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA Organic) or the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA)? These organizations set standards, certify organic products, and provide guidelines to ensure that products claiming to be "organic" meet specific environmental and human health criteria. These certifications assure consumers that the soil, crops and products grown, meet specific organic standards and do not contain toxic chemicals, synthetic fertilizers, or municipal bio-solids.

2 When a company meets these standards, the living soil they create will encourage a diverse culture to allow plants to find themselves and grow naturally. The roots will converse with the collective bio-diverse microbes and learn where the best nutrition options can be found. The process encourages more profound root growth and stability during rough weather conditions and transplant stress.

3 Plants will tolerate a broader PH spectrum when the soil culture is healthy and diverse. If the PH is a little out of range, it will take them some time to socialize with the microbes and find the best path. Be patient and concentrate on proper lighting and watering. They will learn how to take care of themselves.

4 Because of the forgiving and supportive nature of carefully crafted living soil, there are very few mistakes your employees can make in advising your customers. The employees will be confident, and your customers will be happy.

5 Work with companies with an open and responsive staff willing to offer training and effective POP. Check out their social media, online content and get a sense of how they treat and respond to customers.

If you find a company that offers high-quality living soil and treats you like family you've made the right choice.

Does your staff have the right stuff?

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Oregon Association of Nurseries 23
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Advertiser ..... page

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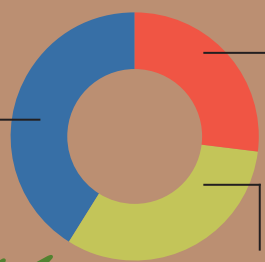
August 2-4, 2023 / Hilton Minneapolis

Best buds

Houseplant hobbyists are spending a significant amount of time and money on keeping their plant friends happy, according to two new consumer surveys. Not only are plant-lovers expanding their collections, they're stocking up on products to keep them looking their best.

Indoor jungles

The Potted Plant, an online plant store based in New Zealand, surveyed more than 1,000 plant owners in New Zealand, Canada, the US, the UK and Australia, and found that plant parents are filling their homes with plants in a big way.



41% own 0 to 20 plants

27% own 40 plants or more

32% own 20-40 plants

Plant affection

A recent online survey of 1,250 people from Trees.com found that plant parents are showing love to their plants to help them grow.

48% of people report talking to their trees and/or plants. **2/3 of those who talk to their plants** believe it helps them grow.

64% of those who talk to their plants believe they have souls or spirits.

1 in 4 people have even kissed their plants.

21% of people who talk to their plants say they do it every day.

71% say they talk to their plants occasionally.

28% have hugged their plants.

Big investments

Approximately **40%** of Potted Plant's survey respondents spend 1 to 3 hours per week on plant care.

16% spend 3 to 5 hours a week

16% spend more than 5 hours a week

66% of respondents said they spend up to $50 a month on plants

17% spent $50-$100 a month

17% spent $100 a month or more

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Sources: bit.ly/trees-dot-com-talking-to-plants, https://bit.ly/planted-pot-houseplants

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A MATURING MARKET

The 2023 Houseplant Report uncovers that demand, prices and sales are still on the rise, but the momentum is starting to slow down from pandemic-era highs.



Houseplant sales have not slowed at Fossil Creek Tree Farm's retail arm, The Haven, located in Fort Worth, Texas. Co-founder Terra Richards says in-store sales continue to increase, due in part to weekly merchandising refreshes. Online sales have also climbed. Photo by Brian Hutson.

SPONSORED SUCCESS STORY

PW PROVEN WINNERS® The #1 Plant Brand®

Reinventing Houseplants with leafjoy™ by Proven Winners

Bold ideas that lead to success require a certain level of bravery, but they are what's needed to propel our industry forward. When we established The Plant Company in 2019, we set a goal: to reinvent how houseplants are produced and sold. Today, we are thankful to work alongside our team in making progress toward that goal and finding innovations in this product category.

As we formulated our business model, we heard the same complaint time and again from retailers—buying houseplants is hard, and the product that is delivered isn't always up to par. We knew we could do better and set out to fix it.

A key factor in our success is our location in the small mountain town of Stuarts Draft, Virginia. Its rich history as an agricultural community dates all the way back to the 1730s. This centralized location puts us within a two-day reach via FedEx of most of our customers, so plants don't spend too much time on a truck before they reach stores.

Unlike many other producers, houseplants are our sole focus, and we grow every crop in a modern, controlled greenhouse environment. We use biologicals almost exclusively in our IPM program and virus-index every crop to ensure we are shipping clean, healthy plants that are leaf shined and ready to sell. Our customers are finding that our plants have a much longer shelf life because they don't go through the shock of being grown outdoors and then merchandised inside.

When it comes to marketing plants, there's no better company than Proven Winners® – The Brand Gardeners Trust™. Our premium product line was a natural fit for their brand, and their market research played an important role in deciding how to promote, package and sell the leafjoy™ collection.

We've learned that one of the primary barriers to consumers purchasing houseplants is the worry about how to care for them and not knowing where they will grow best in their home. That revelation was the chief impetus behind developing variety-specific labels with helpful care tips for every cultivar offered—a vast improvement over the industry's standard generic houseplant labels.

In addition, leafjoy plants have been divided into four collections based on the plants' light and humidity preferences including Atrium™, Cocoon™, SpaScene™ and WorkLife™. Color-coded buttons for each collection are prominently displayed on every label and bench card. They make it easy for retail staff to merchandise the plants and for consumers to see at a glance which ones will work for their conditions. The collections are especially helpful to people who aren't very familiar with houseplants.

Altogether, offering healthy plants with specific care tips and direction for where they will thrive is resulting in amplified consumer success with leafjoy houseplants.

Our growing operation may be young and our goal of reinventing the houseplant business may seem bold, but horticulture runs deep in our veins. We are just getting started and have some exciting new things in store, so stay tuned to The Plant Company.

- Jason vanWingerden and Frank Paul
co-owners of The Plant Company

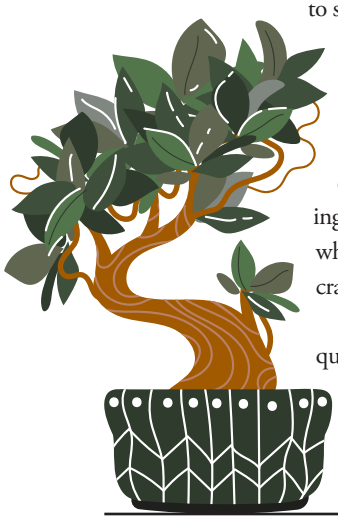






A Maturing MARKET

Houseplant demand, prices and sales are still on the rise, but the momentum is starting to slow down from pandemic-era highs.



Considering the incredibly rapid growth of the houseplant market over the past few years, it's no surprise that the boom is starting to slow. Garden centers' houseplant sales are still strong and trending upward, but IGCs are growth is looking more conservative in the coming year than it did in 2020 when the recent houseplant craze first took off.

While nearly three-quarters of IGCs planned to increase their houseplant stock in 2022, only about half plan to up their offerings over the course of this year. And the number of garden centers expecting a rise in sales is down 14 percentage points this year from last year. That's down a total of 27 percentage points from two years ago.

But growth is still steady, if not as drastic as it has been in past years. A full quarter of garden centers saw a sales increase of 15% or more in last year and the vast majority of IGCs rose their prices last year. And price increases are even more common this year than they were when the houseplant craze first started taking off. In 2020, about 70% of garden centers raised their average houseplant prices, but in 2021 and 2022, 87% raised their average prices.

Of course, it's important to take inflation, rising gas prices and more into consideration as we look at the average plant price. Read on for more insights into the houseplant market now and in the future.

— *Kate Spirgen*



Survey methodology: Data for the 2023 Houseplant Report was collected via online survey of nearly 300 independent garden centers in the U.S. and Canada that offer houseplants at their stores in April 2023.
Editor's note: Due to rounding, not all responses add up to 100%

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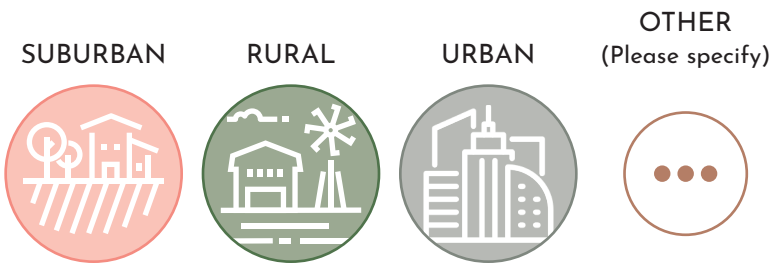
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2023 Houseplant REPORT

How would you describe your garden center's location(s)?



Do you have a houseplant division or designated houseplant section at your garden center?



What types of houseplants do you offer? Please select all that apply.

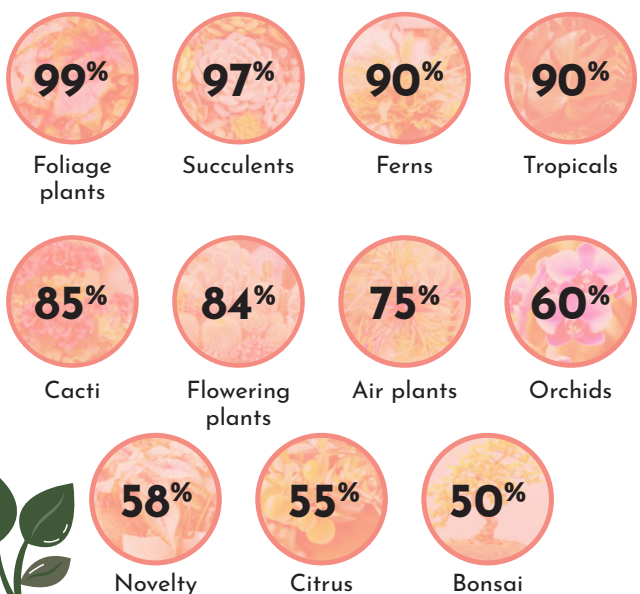
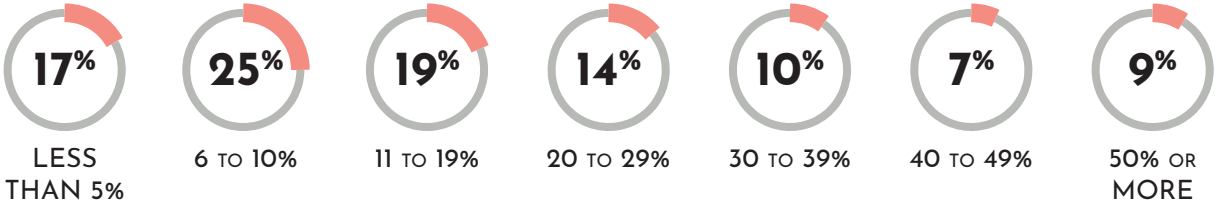
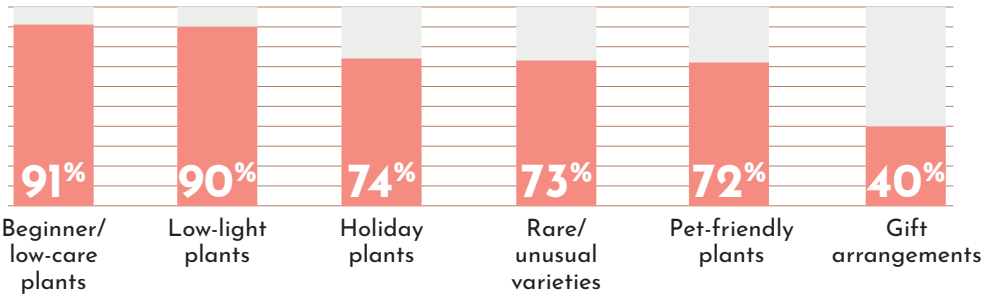


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About what percentage of your sales come from houseplants and related items (containers, potting soil, growing lights, etc.?)



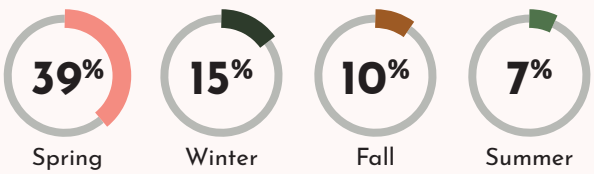
What types of specialty houseplants do you offer? Please select all that apply.



What sizes of houseplants do you offer? Please select all that apply.



In which season are your houseplant sales strongest?



Sales stay consistent across seasons **30%**

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2023 Houseplant REPORT

Slowing growth

For the first time since we began this report in 2020, garden centers are reporting significantly less growth than in previous years, and more are reporting a decrease in sales than ever. For the past three years, only about 3% of IGCs saw a decrease in sales compared to the year before. This year, nearly a quarter of garden centers sold fewer houseplants than the year before.

The number of stores that increased their stock in 2022 was also down by about 10 percentage points compared to 2021, and down 25 points from 2020. And this year, far fewer garden centers are planning to increase their offerings in the coming year than last year.

It's important to note, however, that the explosive growth of the market over the past few years has left sales little room to grow, and customers' homes have filled up with houseplants since the buying boom of 2020.

Forecasting sales for the rest of this year, 69% expect to see an increase in sales, so the market is still growing strong, just not as much as it did during the pandemic boom.



PHOTO © VIKAKURYLO81 | ADOBE STOCK

How did your garden center's 2022 houseplant sales compare to 2021?

Increased more than 15%	25%
Increased 11%-14%	9%
Increased 5%-10%	17%
Increased 1%-4%	8%
Stayed about the same	16%
Decreased 1%-4%	4%
Decreased 5%-10%	7%
Decreased 11%-14%	4%
Decreased more than 15%	7%
We did not offer houseplants last year/Our store is new	4%

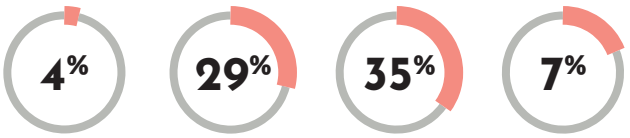


Prices on the Rise

While garden centers might not be increasing their sales as much as the past few years, prices are continuing to climb. In 2022 and 2021, nearly 90% of IGCs raised their plant prices, while in previous years only less than 70% upped their price tags.

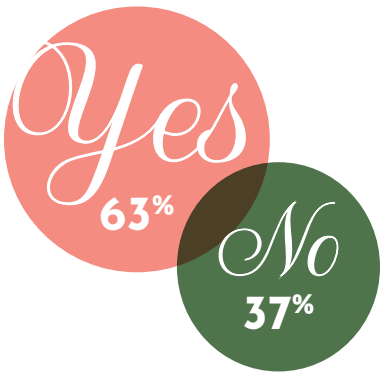
Garden centers on the whole are taking a very different approach to pricing than they did when the houseplant craze first started taking off. While in the past, IGCs looked heavily at the cost from supplier or cost to grow, they're now factoring in market price and demand, as well as freight or shipping costs much more.

How much did your garden center raise its houseplant prices (on average) in 2022?



We did not raise houseplant prices in 2022 - **13%**

Did you increase your houseplant offerings in 2022?



Do you plan to increase your houseplant offerings in 2023?



Grow your own

About what percent of your houseplant stock do you grow?

None	46%
1%-10%	19%
11%-20%	11%
21%-40%	9%
41%-60%	7%
61-80%	6%
80-100%	3%

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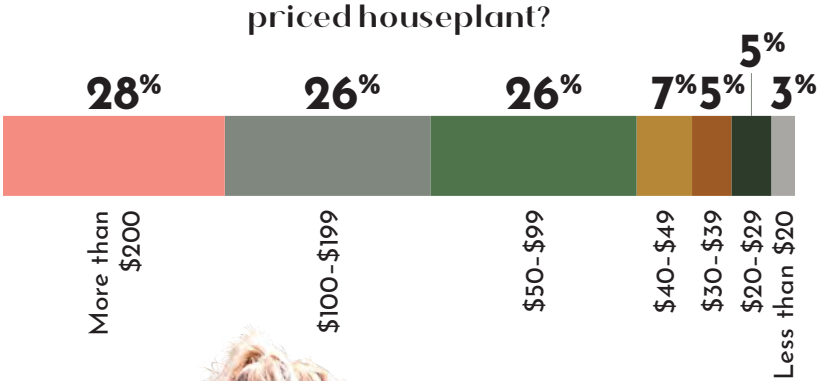
2023 Houseplant REPORT

Which of the following do you take into account when pricing houseplants? Please select all that apply.



Other responses include: maturity of plant, seasonality, perceived value

On average, what is the cost of your highest priced houseplant?



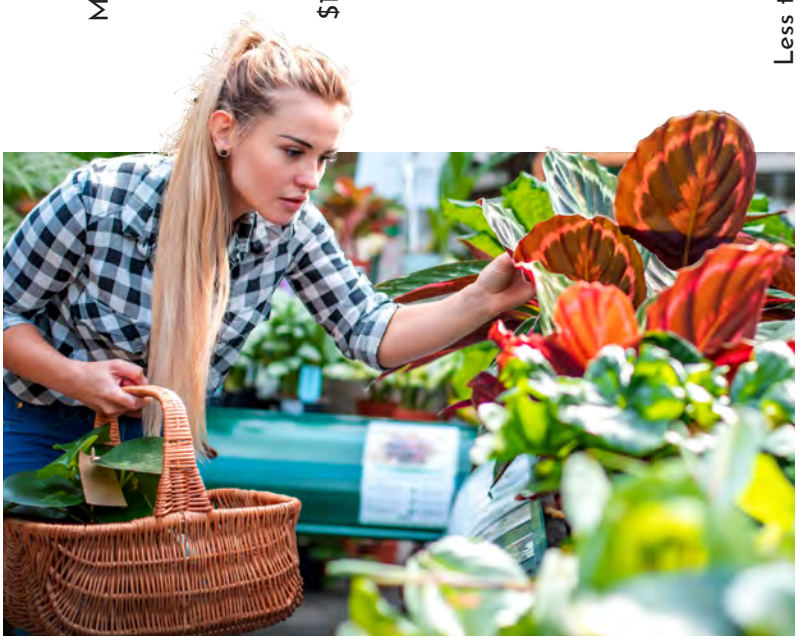


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IN-STORE Preferences

Garden centers are reporting less ambition to sell their houseplant stock online than they did last year. The number of IGCs with no online buying options and no plans to open a web store rose nearly 10 percentage points this year. With COVID farther in the rearview mirror, fewer IGCs are offering the option to buy online and pick up in store as well.

Are you selling houseplants online?

Yes



Yes, we have an e-commerce site



Yes, we allow customers to shop online and pick up in store

No



No, but we plan to in the future



No, we do not and do not plan to in the future

Which social media channels do you use to promote houseplants at your garden center? Please select all that apply.

94% 83% 19% 15% 9% 6% 3%

EDUCATION & OUTREACH

Social media remains one of the most popular ways to promote houseplants, but this year more IGCs are using videos on platforms like TikTok, Facebook and YouTube, and relying less on still images and copy on Pinterest, LinkedIn and Twitter.

What types of education do you offer for houseplant customers? Please select all that apply.



53% In-person events

35% Newsletters

27% Videos (on website or YouTube)

25% Blogs

8% Virtual events

Hot houseplants

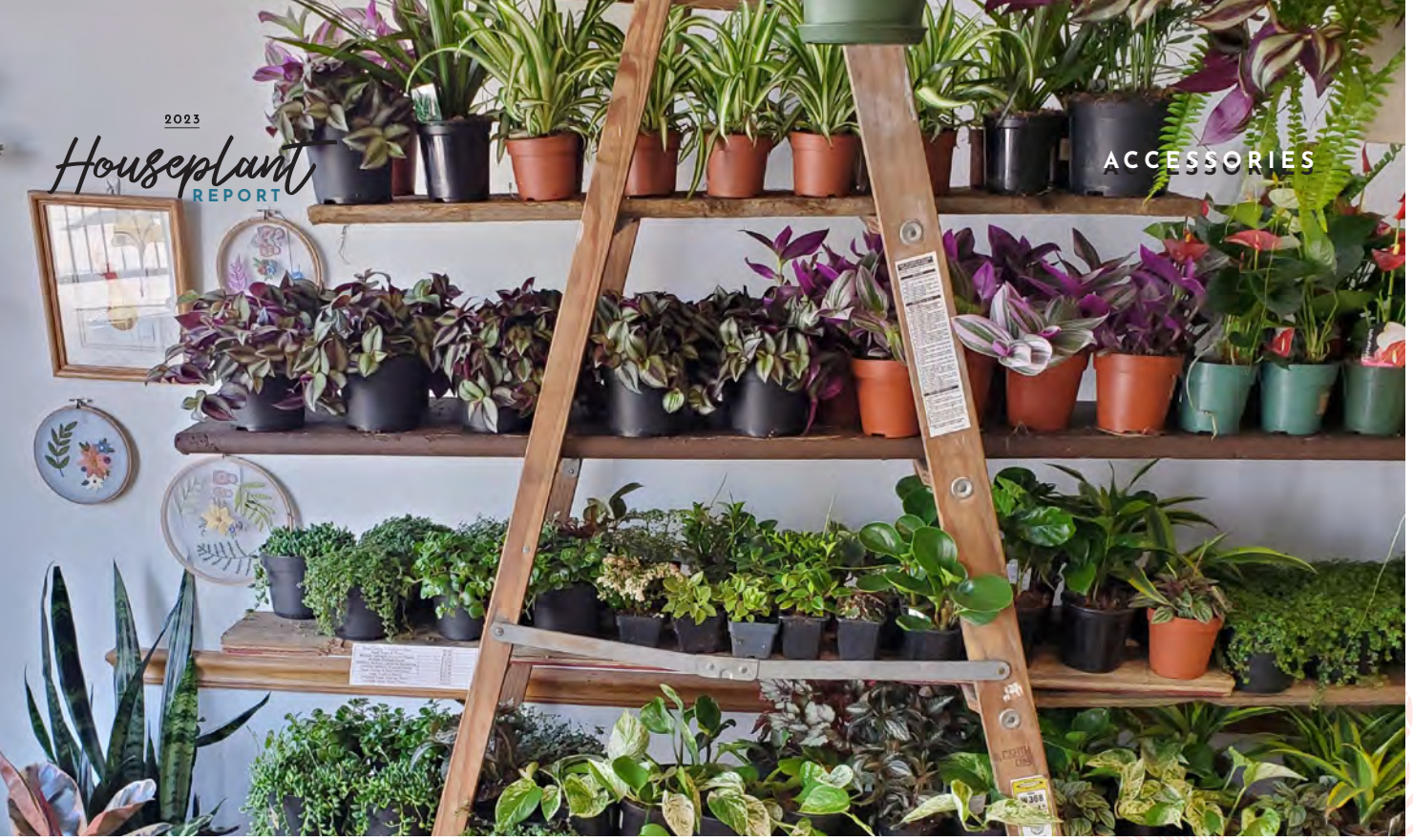
We asked garden centers which plants were their top sellers in 2022. Here are the 10 most popular options from the last year.



1. Succulents **2.** Philodendrons **3.** Pothos **4.** Monstera **5.** Ferns



6. Snake plant **7.** Palms **8.** Orchids **9.** Sansevieria **10.** Calathea



Botanicals and Beyond

Houseplant stores are standing out from the crowd and adding on sales with unique services, accessories, gifts, and more.

By **Kate Spirgen**

With such high demand for houseplants over the past few years, new stores have been popping up to fill the need for indoor plants and supplies. To stand out from the crowd, many are stocking unique, local, plant accessories, botanical-themed gifts and more to keep customers coming back.

"We are actually in a super dense area for houseplant stores," says Johanna Dominguez says, owner of Put A Plant On It in Buffalo, New York, noting that there are eight shops near her that also sell strictly houseplants. "So it's a challenge to come up with something that's different."

At Rooted Plant World in London, Ontario, accessory sales have been on the rise since they opened a few years ago. The sales mix between plants and accessories has risen from about 75% plants/25% accessories to about half and half. "It has definitely increased and that helps with the brick-and-mortar since I can bring in other items," says owner Tracy Root, who originally started her store online.

Service on demand

Put A Plant On It, which got its start in August 2020, has found a niche by offering all kinds of services from houseplant sitting to disease diagnosis to interior plantscaping. Most of the unique offerings came about by listening to what customers want.

Before opening her own store, Dominguez worked at a nursery where the two most common requests were for repotting services and plant diagnoses. Now, Put A Plant On It offers potting with DIY and full-service options, as well as a Houseplant Hospital.

Due to concerns of diseases and pests spreading, Dominguez's former employer wouldn't allow customers to bring plants in, but she says Put A Plant On It hasn't had any issues. "We've been doing this for three years and honestly, most of the issues we see are not contagious at all," Dominguez says. "Out of the hundreds of Houseplant Hospital appointments we do every year, maybe two or three are pests. But most of it is all over potting or some sort of fungal issue, which isn't really contagious."

And it's filling a strong need. Customers used to send Facebook or Instagram messages with photos of plant problems, but oftentimes, Dominguez couldn't tell what was wrong just from a picture. So she starting asking customers to bring their plants into the store. Customers can even book their

PHOTO © VIKAKURYLO81 | ADOBE STOCK





Plant accessories don't have to be plant-themed. These music-themed shelves appeal to more than just the plant shopper.

appointments online now.

"At first, I was a little hesitant to charge people for it," Dominguez says, noting that she originally offered the service for free. "But it was taking up so much time and labor that we ended up starting to charge for it. And 99.9% of people are not averse to it."

Now, Put A Plant On It charges $20 to diagnose small plants, $30 for large plants and a $5 fee for an insecticide, fungicide or fertilizer.

And for monsteras that are looking less than their best, Put A Plant On It offers a Monstera Makeover service. Customers can either bring their plants into the store or have someone come to their home to clean them up, and train them to look more upright and contained. Prices begin at $15 with additional charges for materials like Velcro, stakes and soil.

"That was another customer need," Dominguez says. "People would bring monsteras in, but they didn't need a repotting and it wasn't a Houseplant Hospital issue, so we came up with Monstera Makeovers."

And for those who need a little extra help getting started, Put A Plant On It staff will also go to customers' homes to offer placement and design recommendations. They have started to do more design projects in recent months, even branching out to serve different commercial clients.

Keeping it local

Rooted Plant World carries some products from the U.S. and elsewhere, but Root tries to keep it local to support artists and artisans in her community. But no matter what, she's looking for small businesses to support.

Put A Plant On It has a similar mission and carries products from more than 100 local artists, almost all of whom work within 30 miles of Buffalo. Dominguez not only likes supporting her community, but her customers also appreciate it. Plus, it gives customers options they can't find at larger stores.

"They're supporting four or five people when they buy something here as opposed to a big-box store or something like that," she says. "The artists are able to [support] their families or their kids through their art, and it makes them feel very validated in their art."



Rooted Plant World sells hand-crafted plant stands made with non-toxic paints, stains and varnishes.

Oftentimes, Dominguez or customers will take photos of their purchases in the store, and then tag the artists on social media to give them a signal boost. "The artists, especially pottery artists, like seeing their stuff being used."

Accessories have also helped Rooted Plant World stand out from the crowd, especially with homemade plant stands from Root's husband, Leif. Root was about to sign the lease for Rooted Plant World, but COVID threw a wrench into her plans for a brick-and-mortar store. So she pivoted and opened an online store to begin, eventually moving to a physical location in London, Ontario.

Leif was also stuck at home due to COVID, so he started making plant stands in all different shapes from monstera leaves to paw prints to guitars and even sports themes. "There's everything just to catch the eye," Root says. "Just because you're a plant-lover doesn't mean that you don't like other things, too."

Rooted Plant World also offers custom shelves to fit corners, walls and specific themes. And they're all made with non-toxic paints, stains and varnishes in keeping with the company's values. "We love nature, so we focus on the health and the environmental benefits of plants. We don't want customers breathing in all the chemicals when you have these wood products in your house," Root says. GC

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROOTED PLANT WORLD



Q&A: Darryl Cheng

Learn how the creator of House Plant Journal approaches houseplant care and viral posts.

Darryl Cheng, creator of the Instagram account House Plant Journal (**@houseplantjournal**) and author of "The New Plant Parent," takes an engineer's approach to houseplant care. Since he started House Plant Journal, first on Tumblr, then YouTube, then Instagram, he's answered thousands of questions about plant care. Cheng has grown the House Plant Journal Instagram account to 631,000 followers. With engaging content like time lapse videos showing how houseplants react to light to useful how-to tips on better ways to care for your houseplants, his followers are eager for more from Cheng.

He's built his brand as a houseplant influencer, using his engineering background to explain the science of how plants can thrive. His insights and candor have turned him into a top resource for houseplant care on the internet. He's even developed his own take on the light meter, which provides a more accurate assessment of exactly how much light a plant was receiving. Cheng's LTH meter, which also measures temperature and humidity, is available from his online store.

As an engineer, he likes to solve problems. The big question he wanted to answer was how to measure light levels indoors. The typical light meter measures what's considered adequate light in nature. Early in his houseplant journey, he realized the phrase "bright, indirect light" lacked the data needed to assess how much light your plant was actually getting.

"There's no such thing as a green thumb, only people with large, unobstructed windows," he jokes.

Garden Center spoke with Cheng about his thoughts on houseplants and helping new plant parents be successful.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARRYL CHENG

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"The leafjoy collection from Proven Winners has been a major success for The Gardens at Elder's. The rare varieties make us the go-to place to shop for houseplants. Our local social media followers go wild whenever a new shipment arrives. The superior quality is absolutely the best we have seen. These houseplants allow us to round out the Proven Winners collection in our stores, making us the ultimate Proven Winners Destination."

Jason Rymer
Elder's ACE Hardware



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The Plant Company



Cheng's self-developed LTH meter

How did you get into indoor plant gardening?

My mom asked me to help her decorate the house with houseplants but because she claimed to be bad with houseplants, I needed to figure out how to care for them. This was confusing because she taught me how to do outdoor gardening. When I started reading houseplant care advice, I understood why she didn't understand indoor plants: houseplants were always portrayed as decor that requires maintenance, causing people to believe every minor blemish was 'something wrong.' People expected plants to stay perfect so long as they cared for them properly.

Why did you start House Plant Journal?

My goal in starting House Plant Journal, in writing 'The New Plant Parent', and in creating my online course 'Essentials of Houseplant Enjoyment' is to help people break away from the perfection-driven approach to houseplant care so they can truly enjoy plants. It's a mix of science and realistic expectations to make houseplant care a more rewarding experience.

You built your following on Instagram. What are the current houseplant trends you're seeing there? How have they changed since you wrote your book?

There's definitely a growth in the "plant collecting" aspect of the hobby — not just for adding plants as decor. The use of grow lights is more widespread due to the availability of cheaper and more home-friendly products. This means people can create more optimal environments for more expensive plants.

What factors do you consider when planning a post?

For time lapse videos, I just want to show a commonly available plant doing something that no one has seen at very high speed — like a leaf unfurling. The editing is very important: people scroll past things very quickly so the video must be engaging within the first few seconds. The overall clip should be no longer than 10-20 seconds.

With recent Instagram changes, I feel like regular posts don't reach as wide an audience as they used to, which makes it discouraging to spend so much time writing an informative caption only to have it reach a small percentage of your previous reach. Still, I try to write in my usual style: specific and impactful houseplant care advice — not the usual basic tips and tricks found on every website.

Why did you develop the LTH meter? How does it differ from what was already available?

I wanted a device that was compact and easy to hold. Most others are bulky and awkward to carry around. I also wanted to provide more environmental data so I added temperature and humidity readings. There is no other device that displays all three (light, temperature, and humidity) in one device.

On your site, you have a ton of real houseplant problems people have sent to you. You also offer several different levels of consulting help. How long have you been helping houseplant owners this way, and how has this part of your business grown since you started?

I recently started going to the gym and hired a personal trainer. While it is completely possible to learn all kinds of exercises from YouTube, you don't get



Cheng signing copies of his book at Mulhall's, a Nebraska garden center

direct feedback from an expert. This is the same idea with houseplant care. For generations, you would just hear tips and tricks in passing, try to implement them at home, but inevitably remain disappointed with the plant. People lose hope and label themselves a 'plant killer.'

With the ability to have virtual meetings, I'm able to see exactly what kind of environment people have provided for their plants and I can ask specific questions related to their care habits.

I have been doing these consultations along with discrete questions via email for several years now. It is a smaller portion of my total income.

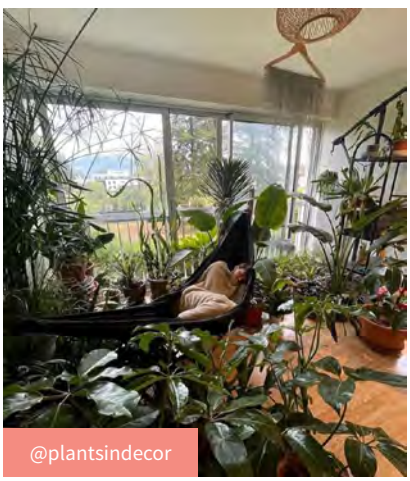
For more: **www.houseplantjournal.com**



Where the houseplants are @ on Instagram

Here is a tiny sampling of other Instagram accounts to follow for more houseplant inspiration.


@botanicalsandbillie


@plantsindecor


@tropicaloco


@houseplantclub


@thejungalow

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Liz Lark-Riley
Mahoney's Garden Centers

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