

## Trends in Plant Product Mix: A Retailer's Perspective

### Larry Newlin

New Garden Landscaping & Nursery, 5888 Old Oak Ridge Road, Greensboro, North Carolina 27410

I would hate to be a grower trying to figure out what New Garden Landscaping and Nursery is going to buy in 5 or 10 years. We are fickle. But, alas, so are our customers. For every generalization I might make, there is buying-pattern evidence that contradicts it. We are operating in a time when trends are difficult to discern, and we find ourselves as a company swept up in a dynamic environment of customer lifestyle- and buying-habit shifts, government regulation, radical weather patterns, and a variable economy.

We have three landscape designers, a landscape architect, six landscape crews, four landscape management crews, and a nursery-stock buyer who spends half his time purchasing plants for retail sales and landscaping and half in retail sales. He and several department managers purchase about one million dollars wholesale value of green goods. A few buying facts:

- Twenty percent of the cultivars of woody ornamentals used in our landscaping and sold in retail were not in our inventory five years ago.
- Eight years ago the largest residential landscape job we had done was \$10,000. In the past two years we have taken on two residential jobs in the neighborhood of a quarter million and two exceeding \$100,000. We have completed a score of residential jobs in the \$25,000 to \$50,000 range right here in the dirt-poor South. Our mix has shifted from 50/50 residential to commercial to 90/10 residential to commercial. In these larger landscape jobs we are using a broad mix of plant material, but we require a large quantity of any one plant. We used to stock over 30 cultivars of junipers, 80 azaleas, 50 dwarf conifers, and 30 hollies. We have made a major effort to limit our inventory to the best performers; and while we may try new cultivars, we are looking for plants that are distinctively different from the ones we carry and that appeal to our retail/landscape customers.
- We try to carry all of the National Arboretum crapemyrtle, but the best seller for us continues to be the standard red, 'Carolina Beauty'.
- We generally try to carry improved cultivars in trees such as *Acer rubrum* 'October Glory' or 'Red Sunset', but in other instances we have found new cultivars to be less desirable than the old standbys. We find 'Bradford' pear to be less susceptible to fire blight than 'Aristocrat'. There is growing interest in other trees that offer seasonal appeal.
- We are finding a renewed interest in plants that help folks reconnect to their past. We call nandina, lacecap hydrangea, weigela, lilac,

peony, delphinium, dahlia, spirea, and magnolia “Granny Plants”. In a recent newsletter I asked, “Do you have a tree of childhood memories?”

- We also find ourselves turning back to old workhorse plants like *Osmanthus fortunei*, *Ligustrum japonicum*, and *Ilex* ‘Nellie R. Stevens’. Nevertheless, we have a special retail display of improved plants from the North Carolina State Arboretum. We find growing acceptance for new plant material, especially if the plants are recommended by our landscape designers or retail salespeople.
- We find we have to limit our designers’ use of certain plants, such as cephalotaxus and zabel laurel, because the availability is poor.
- Five years ago 50% of the shrubs and trees we purchased were from out of state. Today we purchase 80% from nurseries within a 200-mile radius. We find excellent quality and a wide variety. Local purchases also help us with just-in-time inventorying and allow us to reduce or eliminate transportation costs. Some plants, camellias, for example, have fallen out of favor with local growers, and we have to go out of state to bring in the size and variety we require.

While we have pulled in the reins on some of the variety we offer in woody ornamentals, our herb, annual, and perennial selection has quadrupled in the past two years. We offer over 30 cultivars of impatiens, 25 cultivars of geraniums, and 30 cultivars of hosta. If it is blooming, it will sell in retail; and if a plant is blooming when it is installed on a landscape project, it increases our customers’ satisfaction manifold.

### THINKING LIKE OUR FICKLE CUSTOMERS

The rule in marketing today is, “Think like customers.” What do we know about them?

- Customers tell marketing gurus that the major reason they shop today is not price, selection, or any of the stuff they’ve been telling us for years; it’s to solve problems. Our customers are building huge houses on postage-stamp lots, and they want instant privacy. They’ve lost plants to the worst drought and worst winters, the rainiest springs, and the most insect-infested summers. They are tired of climbing up ladders to prune foundation shrubs, and they hate to spray. They want their plants cold hardy, drought tolerant, compact, evergreen, free of disease and insects with blooms in the spring, colorful foliage in the fall and pretty berries in the winter. They are stressed out and pressed for time, and they want a maintenance-free landscape with a lot of inspiration . If we can figure out what their problems are (just ask them!), then we can figure out what plants to grow for them.
- They tell marketing gurus that climbing the ladder to success is no longer their highest priority. When asked, “What’s most important in your life?” they respond, “Family, health, and happiness.”

What about family? Increasingly we are seeing retail purchases and landscaping decisions made jointly by couples. It used to be that the women gardened and the men landscaped, but now we are adding perennials to the foundation planting, herbs to our patio garden, and bulbs in our azalea bed. Moreover, we are seeing a big push towards kids' gardening. We don't sell a lot of kids' merchandise, but we do have a Kids' Club with over 1,000 kids between 4 and 12. We also host a Garden Festival in May and a Harvest Festival in October to offer families a fun-filled Saturday of hayrides, straw mazes, face painting, and the like.

Maybe the exponential growth in herb sales can be attributed to the increased interest in health. Two Lowe's superstores, two Wal-Mart's, and one Home Depot have come to town in the past two years, but none of them offer the competition for our customers' discretionary dollar like health spas, jogging, tennis, and hiking paraphernalia, and all the other health-craze expenditures. Somehow we need to find other avenues to capture the health interest of our customers. Maybe we can even interest them in edible landscape plants again. We are planning a special edible landscape display next spring and have touted in our newsletter the exercise provided and the calories expended through gardening.

Isn't happiness what our industry is about? Don't they have flowers at weddings and funerals, in hospitals and at parties, on anniversaries and holidays? Aren't those public gardens that are jam-packed on weekends with picnickers, joggers, and strollers? Isn't that why Disney invests a small fortune in its grounds—to make us happy? Shouldn't our retail locations be designed to invite folks to browse and enjoy a relaxing afternoon? When stress is a major personal obstacle in many folks' lives, can't we invite them, "Don't worry, be happy?"

If I were a plant propagator, I'd hang around the local garden center and even volunteer my services occasionally as a salesman to find out what customers are thinking. Although our salespeople don't have the knowledge and skills of a Michael Dirr or a J. C. Raulston, we are providing training opportunities through conferences and in-house that will better equip them to value and, therefore, to sell new plants available to us.

Our industry has changed radically in recent years and is apt to change even more in the years ahead. The chain stores have taken over many of the product lines we used to sell like gallon azaleas, bags of mulch, and grass seed. That leaves us with what we like best—plants. It means we have more time to merchandise them, to develop signs that include a bit of plant lore, and to share our enthusiasm and knowledge with our customers.