

# The problematic plant information triangle

BY KYM POKORNY

**T**HE NURSERY INDUSTRY runs on a three-way relationship between growers, retailers and the public. And it's not just the trading of cash for products that drives it. It's the exchange of information and feedback.

Compare the relationship to a highway system. One might say that the flow of feedback along this busy road can get mighty jammed, especially during the rush hour of spring and early summer.

The interchange of crucial plant information can come to a screeching halt. The result is lost opportunities to increase sales, improve products, tweak selection and create healthy landscapes.

Matt Pulliam, green goods general manager for the retail branch of Moana Nursery in Reno, Nevada, said retailers are responsible for gathering data about the plants they sell and passing it to their customers.

"We're the evangelists," he said. "We're trying to get people to be gardeners. Growers, on the other hand, grow a commodity, a quality crop, and let you do with it what you will."

In the same conversation, however, he admitted to frustration with the wholesale nurseries that supply him.

"Quite honestly, we can't even get growers to say, 'This is what is good and you should take it,'" Pulliam said. "We get that information at the Farwest Show, but at other times we don't. I would jump on it. I want things to turn. I want it in the car today."

Such contradictions speak to the difficulty in identifying where the tangle between growers and end consumers starts and how the knot can be unraveled.

Traditionally, growers were farmers. They grew plants to saleable size, stuck labels in the cans, loaded them onto trucks and sent them down the road. What happened after that wasn't their concern.

"There's still a healthy group that are not connected to customers," said Sid Raisch, president of the horticultural consulting firm Advantage Development System. "They are only concerned about

plants. You can only be so successful without some sort of marketing."

Still, the gap between growers and gardeners has improved dramatically over the years, leading some larger companies such as Bailey Nurseries to cross the bridge and meet in a three-way exchange of information that benefits everyone.

With marketing strategies built around social media, consumer research, branding and connections with garden writers, Bailey



has helped make its iconic Endless Summer® line of hydrangeas endlessly popular.

"That's the type of thing other growers can buy into," Raisch said. "They're buying into a consumer connection because the brand is building and maintaining, and people are coming into the store already connected to that plant."

## Connecting with consumers

Relating to consumers is more important than ever. In the 1970s and '80s, the industry expanded swiftly as almost 76 million Baby Boomers grew to adulthood. But the recession hit and the generation began to age. Those two factors caused profits to fall and led to the contraction and consolidation of nurseries.

"We are a mature industry," said Jonathan Pedersen, vice president of business development for Monrovia. "We are not at a time of rapid expansion anymore. Those days are over. It's more difficult today. We have to try harder."

Even so, Pedersen is not pessimistic. Research undertaken by Monrovia shows that as serious hobbyist gardeners decline, others take their place.

The study found the gardening public can be divided into four camps:

**Zen gardeners** are made up of Millennials concerned with the environment and interested in plants that support nature;

**Dedicated gardeners** are willing to try new things, especially edibles, but don't have a lot of experience;

**Practical gardeners** make up close to 50 percent of the public and want their garden to look nice but don't want to be out there fussing every weekend; and

**Apprehensive gardeners** don't like plants and are more comfortable with concrete in their backyard.

To thrive, Pedersen said, growers must make an effort to recognize at least one of these groups and be prepared to serve them plants that fit their lifestyles, whether those are pollinator-friendly plants for the zen gardener, blueberries for the dedicated, low-maintenance plants for the practical, or tough, no-fail plants for the apprehensive.

Monrovia's research is a bottom-up approach. They've learned from consumers what they want. But it doesn't always take focus groups to tell growers what the public will buy. If nursery producers pay attention to trends, they can get ahead of the curve.

"I see customer requests filter back to us, the grower," said Joe Dula, manager of the wholesale arm of Moana Nursery in Canby, Oregon. "They find out about the plant of the year, or somewhere a garden writer writes about a developing plant and it gets marketed at a consumer level. They come to retail shops and show a photo and say, 'This is cool, I want it.' If it starts to catch on, we grow it."

On the other hand, sometimes growers need to put the kibosh on a plant whether there's demand or not.

"Information does need to be a two-way street," Dula said. "There's 'Capital' pear. It's columnar and has shiny leaves, but it's the worst tree in the world. The crotch angles >>>

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are narrow and weak. It's so narrow that when it's large, it tears itself down. We quit growing it and now if we get retail orders we tell them we've found it to be a problem and recommend something else."

Unfortunately, many growers simply don't have the time or finances to put into educating the public or the retail outlets that are the go-betweens.

Grace Dinsdale, owner of wholesale Blooming Nursery and retail Blooming Junction, drives both sides of the information highway, but sees no easy answers about how to overcome the traffic jam.

For a while, she tried doing early season clinics to introduce garden center buyers to new plants, especially those she passionately feels belong in the western Oregon landscape.

"It's really important and the retailers ate it up," she said. "There's no question getting more information out to them so

they can get it to the consumer is important and very effective. But they were busy and we were busy and it's hard to find the budget to do it."

### Creating buzz

Early in her career as a nursery owner in the early 1980s, Dinsdale sold at farmers markets to earn extra cash. The experience gave her direct insight into what consumers wanted. After her wholesale nursery grew and the farmers market gig fell by the wayside, Dinsdale remembered the satisfying one-on-one exchanges and held on to the idea of a retail outlet.

In 2013, she opened Blooming Junction in Cornelius, Oregon. Owning a retail nursery lets her educate the public directly about the plants she wants to see make it onto their carts and into their gardens. Already, she watches customers walk through the still-young display gardens,

making lists, knowing that the demand she's creating will trickle up the wholesale ladder.

Mark Leichty, director of business development for Little Prince of Oregon Nursery, a wholesale operation in Aurora, Oregon, takes an energetically modern approach to educating the public, creating buzz for the nursery and helping out their garden center customers in the process. Social media — Facebook in particular — has become his tool of choice.

"Marketing is a very expensive aspect of business and social media has the potential to reach more people than conventional marketing techniques and it's far cheaper," Leichty said. "You essentially become your own PR company."

So Leichty has taken to the road, putting thousands of miles on his truck to visit three or four garden centers each weekend, snapping photos and posting them to Little Prince's Facebook page. From there

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it blossoms, reaching follower after follower.

On Mother's Day, Leichty made stops at Sebright Gardens, Adelman Peony Gardens and French Prairie Gardens. He featured about 30 photos and spent \$20 to promote the post. Within two weeks, it had been viewed by 9,488 people and counting. The three businesses had received 1,200 visits to their websites.

"So even if one of those people comes into one of those nurseries and spends a hundred bucks and buys \$20 of our stuff, there's our money back," Leichty said. "It drives consumers into the garden center and ultimately pays back to Little Prince because they order more of our plants."

So far, it's working. Sales at Little Prince of Oregon are up more than 10 percent in 2016, according to Leichty.

In other cases, however, staff is small, no one is technologically savvy and social media is not a priority.

### Tapping into technology

At Monrovia, not only is social media a priority, but cutting-edge digital technology also gets wholehearted support.

After the company's consumer research showed tags needed to be more of a quick read, they were redesigned with simplified wording and more icons, as well as a "TAP" — a text app that allows users to text a number and immediately get back a text with a link, which opens up a browser with loads more information they can refer to at the garden center or at home.

Gardeners can even sign up to get more material when it's relevant: when to prune, how to prune, when to plant a cover crop, when cold days are coming, and so on. The latest feature allows gardeners to shop online and pick up their plants at a garden center.

All of these changes and more have led to double-digit growth for Monrovia this spring, Pedersen said.

This might be the future, but not everyone can afford it. What smaller growers may be able to get their budgets around are third-party branded lines such as BrazelBerries®, Flower Carpet® and Knock Out® roses, Proven Winners® plants, Wave™ petunias from Ball Horticultural Company, Endless Summer hydrangeas >>



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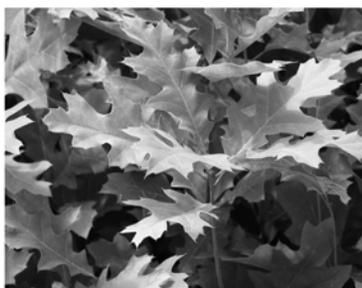


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and a host of others.

The marketing for these brands has already been done. Consumers know about them from social media, garden writers, Martha Stewart, their favorite HGTV show or a digital ad bouncing around in the margins of their Facebook page, email or newsfeed. Once they come in to buy these plants, what's the chance they'll buy something else?

Pretty big, Raisch said. "Consumers want to come to your store," he said. "You need one specific item to get them in the door, like grocery stores and milk. Then they buy a bunch of other stuff."

Even with all the innovations, Pedersen still believes there is a disconnect between many growers and consumers. The reason is "likely because the grower doesn't sell directly to the consumer," he said. "We're removed from the relationship. Growers believe the connection with the public is the retailers' job. The problem with that is it leads to the commoditization of our product and that's a slippery slope to downward pricing. We need to fight the idea that our product is just a commodity."

Mark Bigej, co-owner of Al's Garden Centers, said, "The more growers communicate with the end consumer, the better they are. My personal opinion is that we as an industry, and I group retailers in with that, think we know what consumers want. But we don't go out and ask them. We don't have focus groups trying to reach out and find out what they want. As an industry, we do a poor job of that."

Which brings the puzzle back to communication. But who takes the wheel? Growers, garden centers? Surely it's not the consumers' responsibility.

Perhaps it's time to adopt new tools or recommit to old ones and see if that doesn't unsnarl the three-way traffic jam. Moving information in a more deliberate fashion will begin to shift the balance and make it easier for communication to flow between grower, retailer and the public. ☺

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