

Meeting the market

Nurseries find new markets to serve and new ways of reaching them

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

AS NURSERIES ADAPT to meet future conditions, one of the areas they will need to address is market outreach and development.

Green infrastructure is one emerging market for plant material. Governments, water utilities, companies and communities around the world paid nearly \$25 billion in 2015 for nature-based solutions to secure reliable access to clean water, according to the report, “Alliances for Green Infrastructure: State of Watershed Investment 2016.”

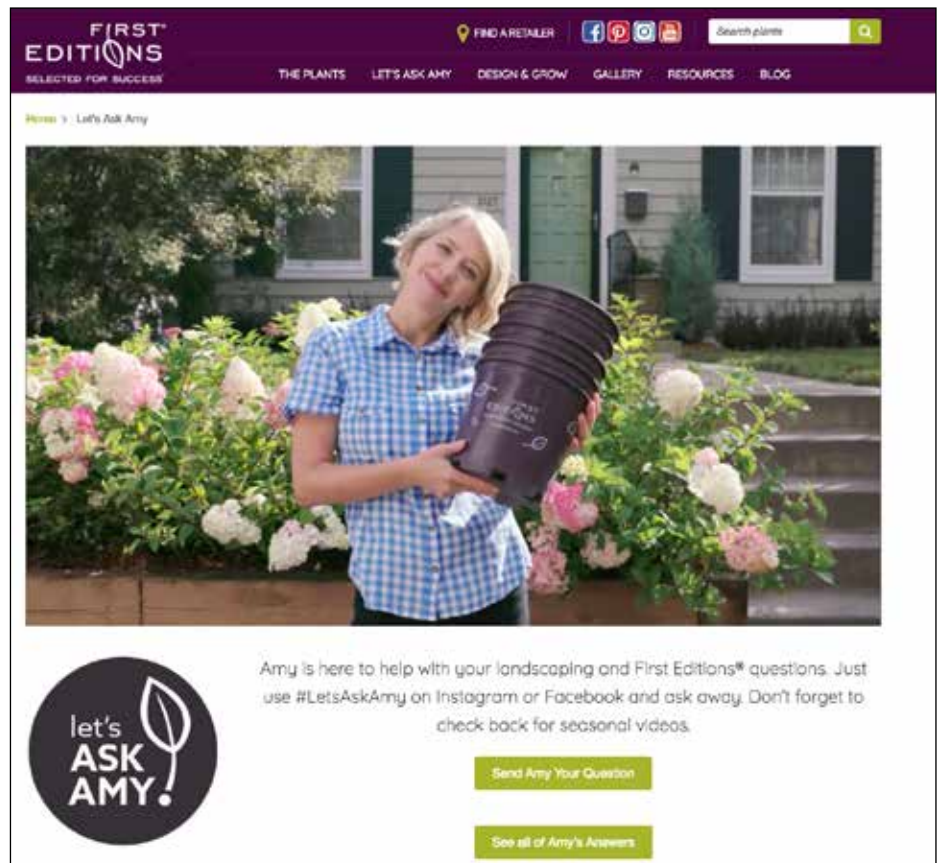
Gardeners, meanwhile, continue to be a primary end consumer for plants, but the relationship between grower, gardener and retailer is changing. Some wholesale growers are reaching out to gardeners directly, both to promote the material and build a relationship with the consumer.

Greening the built environment

Green infrastructure is expected to continue to be a multibillion-dollar sector as public and private entities and individuals invest in trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses — oftentimes all specified as natives — for projects that include bioswales, permeable pavements, green parking and green roofs.

In these market segments and others, there are decision-makers — landscape architects, landscape designers, urban foresters and other specifiers of plant material — who help build the plant lists for small and large projects alike. One study identified them as the decision-makers at least 30 percent of the time (on par with city engineers) for plants listed in public installations.

“In the immediate future, we see the landscape channel as being important,” said Marc McCormack, director of sales and marketing at Bailey Nurseries (St. Paul, Minnesota). Bailey sells across all market channels (consumer, grower to grower, etc.), and they set production goals by first identifying whom they will



The screenshot shows the website for First Editions, a nursery brand. The header includes the logo 'FIRST EDITIONS SELECTED FOR SUCCESS' and navigation links: 'THE PLANTS', 'LET'S ASK AMY', 'DESIGN & GROW', 'GALLERY', 'RESOURCES', and 'BLOG'. There is also a 'FIND A RETAILER' button and a search bar. The main content area features a photo of a woman, Amy, holding a plant in a pot. Below the photo is a circular logo with the text 'let's ASK AMY.' and a leaf icon. To the right of the logo, text reads: 'Amy is here to help with your landscaping and First Editions® questions. Just use #LetsAskAmy on Instagram or Facebook and ask away. Don't forget to check back for seasonal videos.' Below this text are two buttons: 'Send Amy Your Question' and 'See all of Amy's Answers'.

Bailey Nurseries launched a new online campaign called “Let’s Ask Amy” for its First Editions brand. Home gardeners can ask plant care and landscaping questions by using the #LetsAskAmy hashtag on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

grow for and whom they will market to. The landscape channel figures greatly into their future plans.

“We feel we need to step up to communicate with that group and provide relative content that is going to speak to them,” McCormack said. “We can’t assume they are exposed to our brands, and if we can expose our brands and our plants to that channel, they are going to go to the grower or reseller and ask for our plants.”

In that way, “we create demand not necessarily from us but from the folks who sell our products across North America,” McCormack said.

J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. (Boring,

Oregon) has been cultivating this audience for years, according to Nancy Buley, director of communications.

“(We’re going) to fewer nursery trade shows and to more specifier-type events, such as the ASLA [American Society of Landscape Architects] national meeting,” she said.

Regularly, she books engagements where she can speak to landscape architects, and she’s developed communications with urban foresters. These conversations with foresters have been part of a broader, longer-term initiative for J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. to position itself as a source for the emergent market for greater diversity of tree species and urban tree species ➤

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in particular. The nursery has over time grown more oaks, natives and minor species that “weren’t really in the mainstream nursery trade in the past.”

Reaching the consumer directly

Traditionally, growers don’t talk directly to the end consumer.

That’s changing. More and more growers are looking for value-added ways to connect directly with consumers. It’s a way to support their wholesale clients and encourage a consumer preference for their products.

Some wholesalers are even considering direct sales to consumers.

Last fall, J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. released a trunk wrap for its container trees. The bright and pleasing wraps include succinct information about how trees add value to the home and directs consumers to a website for more information. This simple pull-through marketing campaign taps into environmental awareness and helps the product stand out at retail.

“There is more and more competition for consumer dollars, and it’s important to take that information of the value of trees and plants, quantify the value, and use that to market our plants and help us be more successful,” Buley said. “There is a lot of noise and distractions.”

The other piece to cutting through the noise is to focus on interactive market-

Through a collaborative effort of growers, retailers, plant breeders and introducers, Syn-RG envisions a process whereby the best of the best plants could emerge. Rather than becoming part of a new brand, the plants are certified with the Handpicked for You™ designation.

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF SYN-RG™



ing. Forward-looking strategies will use social media to enhance marketing for growers’ customers.

For instance, Bailey has launched a new feature called “Let’s Ask Amy” that it rolled out on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for its First Editions brand.

Amy — in this case, an office administrator at the nursery’s ad agency — is positioned as an average working American relatively new to gardening, rather than an expert. She’s featured in photos and videos with information and is always available to answer questions.

Consumers use a hashtag, #LetsAskAmy, on any of the social media platforms, and their question and any associated pictures or video will be posted

to the Bailey website. Responses are then posted to the website and social media within 24 hours.

Bailey customers are encouraged to use the links to Amy, her videos and her website, in their own marketing to give consumers a 24-hour connection to an additional source of non-technical, down-to-earth and correct advice.

“We’ve had a really good response to Amy, all through social media and the website,” McCormack said. “It is amazing how many people you can reach. That will be part of our future strategy, and I think other growers can do this kind of interactive piece and reach out to their customers.”

Another piece to enhancing the digital experience in the future is e-commerce.

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“We as consumers buy almost everything online, plants included, but they are trickier because of the perishability component,” McCormack said.

Nonetheless, if growers don't keep this channel at the forefront of their future plans, they will miss out, he said. So, Bailey is working with a mail-order company that buys the plants, Bailey ships the plants and the mail-order company does fulfillment. Bailey also works with companies doing some of their direct consumer fulfillment.

“There may be opportunities like this for smaller growers to do the same, to find a way to feed the need for e-commerce” if they can manage consumer fulfillment, McCormack said.

Expanding the partnership with IGCs

“The independent garden centers are under siege; they need help,” said Mark Sellew, president of Prides Corner Farms (Lebanon, Connecticut), which grows more than 2,200 varieties on more than 350 acres and makes no sales to big box stores.

This “help” has yielded a massive new venture by Prides Corner, which joined a consortium of five East Coast growers, collectively called Syn-RG™, to enhance the value of the plants they offered their independent garden center customers.

The goal of the new partnership is to be more collaborative with garden centers by involving them in rigorous trialing and selection of plants to sell under a trustmark called Handpicked for You™. Sellew said the trustmark will give garden centers a way to be more relevant and stronger in their marketing and provide access for consumers to a certification program that provides assurances of plant success.

The other four nurseries in the consortium are Overdeest Nurseries (Bridgeton, New Jersey), Saunders Brothers (Piney River, Virginia), Sheridan Nurseries (Georgetown, Ontario) and Willoway Nurseries (Avon, Ohio).

All of the nursery heads participated in the two-year Executive Academy for Growth and Leadership training pro- ➤



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gram headed by Charlie Hall of Texas A&M, who is an economist by training and grew up on a nursery in North Carolina.

“As a result of that time together, we hatched the genesis of that idea,” Sewell said. “I’m 60 years old, and we are so much stronger working together. We are hoping down the road to invite others in the West.”

What the partnership is not about is introducing new branded products.

“We have brand fatigue,” Sewell said. “We are a victim of our own success because we overwhelm consumers walking into a garden center,” Sewell said. With Handpicked for You, “we are simplifying the choices, handpicking the plants that the garden center believes are best, and becoming more relevant to the garden center.”

Syn-RG wants to provide customers a solid platform to promote plants that

are better tested, enhance their customers’ lifestyle and allow garden centers to create their own plant lists that they believe in and are vetted for local conditions.

The consortium expects this model to benefit them and garden centers by selling more plants. Already 25 garden centers of the 700 the consortium nurseries collectively sell to have signed up for the program, which launches this year. Once a plant is bestowed a trustmark and available for sale, tags and other typical marketing materials will be available as well as a website for consumer referencing.

“It was not hard to get early adopters,” Sewell said. “We are not telling them what to buy. They are wary of new plants, wondering are they really going to perform, and we are telling our customers you are going to help determine that.”

Garden centers will be getting free plants and testing them, up to two years. Plus, there are no limits on their ability to sell other plants. The garden centers are therefore not limited in what they can buy, and similarly there are no restrictions on the individual nurseries in the consortium to what they can sell.

“We’re not going into business together; we are sharing best management practices. We each make decisions independently,” Sewell said. “I think we have a great industry, and we have to continue to find ways to stay together, to make our product better. We have to work together.” ☺

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