

Stepping outside the box

THERE IS NO DOUBT that the business world is constantly changing.

Keeping up with whatever might be current is always a challenge. Trends come and go in every type of business — and garden centers are no exception.

Flower colors are in a constant state of flux; some colors are in high demand one year and fizzle the next. Plant palettes are also ever changing.

A few years ago, could you imagine garden centers offering entire sections of plants marketed as “pollinator friendly,” “bee friendly” or “native plants?” Probably not.

Then there are the avid gardeners who are always looking for something new. Many are willing to push the plant zone in terms of winter hardiness. It can be challenging for garden centers to sufficiently meet all of these aspirations, but most do try.

Unlike many businesses, garden centers are extremely dependent on the weather. In the Pacific Northwest, the key selling months are April, May and June.

The problem is, the weather is never predictable. Even with the best preparation, attractive and interactive displays and friendly staff, there will be fewer customers if the weather does not cooperate. That's what happened this past April, when it was cold and rainy for most of the month.

Thankfully, there are die-hard customers who turn out no matter what. For them, it is crucial that garden centers offer what they probably came in for, and that is plants. Plants have to be the number one category for any garden center.

That said, there's nothing wrong with diversifying and trying new things.

The following garden centers, all based in the Portland, Oregon metro area, are examples of this emerging concept. They have some unique ideas and are truly “stepping outside the box.”

Dennis' 7 Dees Garden Center

I was surprised earlier this season to stop at my local Lake Oswego location of this regional chain and see, within a display of plants, a canopy covering a small section with produce for sale.

According to employee Joe Kerzel, this



is the first year for them to have such a display. Joe explained that they are attempting to have as much local produce available as possible and that, of course, the produce will change depending on the season.

They work with an excellent distributor, who checks the display twice a day (at 7 a.m. and 3 p.m.) to ensure that everything is fresh. The display is a mini fruit stand with clear signage and even tear-off sheets suggesting recipes. Customer feedback has been very positive and many customers pick up some fresh berries, plums or apricots as an impulse item, Joe said. The ideal customer? That's the one who fills a cart with both plants and produce.

Cornell Farm

This retailer sits on five acres, with the property originally being a goat dairy. In the early years, some of the land was planted in nursery stock that was sold wholesale.

Initially there were farms throughout the area. Now, the surrounding area is primarily residential housing, although there is a large hospital nearby.

Cornell Farm is well known for their use of color and their very creative use of containers, as well as the plant combinations in them. It is common to see doctors, nurses and staff coming to the Cornell Farm during their lunch break to browse through the displays.

With few options for lunch venues in the surrounding area, customers often asked, “Do you have anything to drink or maybe a snack?” For a long time, the answer was “no” — but you can see where this is going.

In 2013, the husband-and-wife team Deby Barnhart and Ed Blatter made the decision to open a cafe at the nursery. The original 1926 house where Ed's parents



Mike Darcy

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lived when he was born was still standing on the property and was used as a storage facility. This house was converted into a cafe and opened in 2016.

Ed is a coffee connoisseur and Deby is a tea connoisseur, and in addition to top-quality drinks, they wanted good food, so they hired a pastry chef. “Everything is made here except bread,” Deby said. “Nothing is fried, everything is baked.” They strive to be as organic as possible.

When planning the café, they hired a restaurant consultant. According to Deby, this was an invaluable decision. She and Ed were plant people, not restaurant



people. They notice that the cafe brings in a new group of people who are not necessarily gardeners but who want good food.

These people also like to see ideas for using plants. Thus, colorful containers are displayed around the grounds of the cafe.

Deby believes that the cafe improves their nursery sales. The cafe is open 7 a.m.–5:30 p.m. and the nursery from 9 a.m.–6 p.m. They have learned to have a staff person at the nursery before it officially opens because a 7 a.m. coffee customer might want to buy a plant and probably won't want to wait until 9 a.m. ➤

What I'm Hearing

The cafe space is not leased to someone else, but owned and operated by Cornell Farm. This gives them control over the operation. Currently they do not have staff for table service but this may change because they are discovering that people dislike standing in line for breakfast or lunch.

They do offer beer and wine, and the menu changes monthly. Deby reports they are seeing increases in patronage and when I was there for lunch, there were few empty chairs.

Al's Garden & Home

In 1948, a fruit stand opened in Woodburn, Oregon called Al's Fruit Stand. The business thrived and soon shrubs were added and the name changed to Al's Fruit & Shrub Center. Then annuals and perennials began to appear, the fruit section became smaller, and so the name was changed to Al's Garden Center.

Then in 2005, outdoor furnishings began to appear. This year, the company changed its name to Al's Garden & Home.

The Al's store in Sherwood, Oregon was meant to be a destination center with not only a full line of plants, but also gifts, garden accessories and clothing. One reason the owners designed it as a destination center was that they could provide adequate space for outdoor furniture displays.

This new product category seemed promising, but then the recession hit and garden centers across the country suffered for a few years. Few would consider outdoor furniture a necessity, particularly during a recession.

In 2012, after the recession, it was decided to once again try the outdoor furniture category and test the waters. New homes were being built, the lots were small



and large trees were usually not an option.

So with yards shrinking, outdoor furniture seemed like a natural way to increase sales.

Mark Bigej, chief operating officer of Al's Garden & Home, discussed this category and how it fit into Al's business model. Mark said that it is very challenging for an outdoor furniture buyer to predict trends and he likened it to buying for the Christmas season. Once the Christmas season is over, it is time to buy for the next year.

With outdoor furniture, June and July are the best selling months and so the buyer has to predict what the best selling items will be for the next year. It is a guessing game and Mark stressed that it is important to have a designated buyer who is familiar with this product category.

It is also important to have at least one person available at all times who is knowledgeable about the product category and can answer customer questions.

Al's Garden & Home now carries furniture sets for deep seating, dining, small bistro and fire pits. Four years ago, grills were added. Those are the responsibility of a different buyer. All of the products are in the mid to upper end price range.

Adequate space is a key ingredient because there must be an assortment of styles and colors available to give customers options, while always remembering that plants are the number one priority. Furniture delivery is a paid option.

Mark views this product category as up and coming. In 2016, outdoor furniture was responsible for 10 percent of the sales at the Sherwood location.

Portland Nursery

This longtime retailer's location on Stark Street — one of two they own — is surrounded by residential homes. Parking is limited and often challenging.

Still, the owners want to make every visit pleasant experience, which includes changing the offerings customers see

throughout the year.

Portland Nursery reaches out to various plant clubs and societies that are dedicated to cactuses, fuchsias, orchids, irises, chrysanthemums and others. These clubs are offered free space for a canopy and table. Society members can bring in displays and even sell products with no add-on fee.

Ken Whitten, store manager of the Stark Street location, said that many of these societies are struggling to attract members.

The nursery wants to help them as much as possible. Society members almost always report that they have gained new members at each visit.

To help extend the selling season into the late summer, Portland Nursery offers "Summer Evening Cooking." It has been a very popular attraction.

They bring in Chef Dan Brophy, instructor at the Oregon Culinary Institute, for a series of cooking workshops. He gives out samples and discusses jams, chutneys, pickles, salsas and more, giving tips on how to preserve them for year-round enjoyment.

He also highlights the use of plants that might be growing in local gardens. The plants are not just vegetables and herbs, but also flowers that can also be utilized in cooking. This has proven to be an excellent way to draw people into the nursery during August and September, when gardening sales are dwindling.

Certainly other garden centers are also "stepping outside the box" with their own ideas. They should be commended for doing so.

People today have so many options for spending their time and money. If you make your garden center unique, it can become a place that customers frequent year round — not just during the spring months. With this kind of creativity, garden centers will hopefully remain central to our thriving communities. ☺

