



## Product Filter

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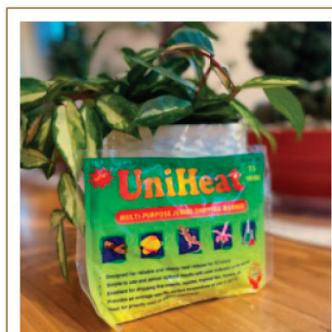
Product USDA Zone ▾

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## Our Plants

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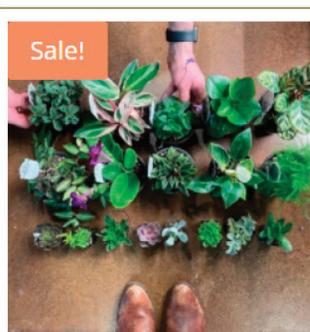
A Heat Pack - Shipping  
Addition for Cold Weather



\$3.95

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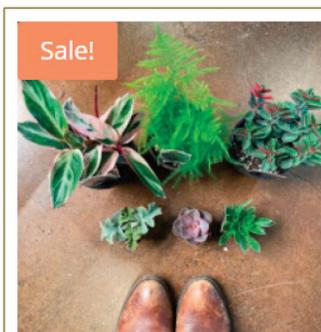
A Houseplant Haul - April Drop,  
Ryan's Picks



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A Mini Haul - April Drop, Ryan's  
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# Meeting online customer expectations

Prepare before jumping into online retail, lest the opportunity become a pitfall

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

**C**OVID-19 PUSHED many garden centers to catch the growing wave of online shopping. E-commerce sales are forecasted to account for nearly a fifth of all U.S. retail sales by 2025, according to Statista.

Total retail e-commerce sales in 2021 increased 17.9%, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. That includes a 25% surge in the fourth quarter over third-quarter sales, and a 9% increase over fourth-quarter 2020 numbers. In 2022, U.S. e-commerce sales will cross \$1 trillion, which is two years earlier than previous predictions, according to eMarketer.

In-store shopping is already rebounding as the pandemic wanes, and it will remain the core way customers interact with independent garden centers. Customers like to browse, explore, and see plants in a garden setting or among other plants.

Nevertheless, online retail selling has arrived as a convenience for customers with busy lives.

Here we explore what's necessary to successfully sell online.

## Wrangling your inventory

Before the pandemic, the only thing **Portland Nursery** (Portland, Oregon) sold online was gift cards.

"That was it," said Troy Dunsmuir, one of four co-owners.

But the nursery had a solid point-of-sale (POS) system in place, Magento, and a service provider, Xsitra, which had been working with the nursery for 10 years. That gave them a leg up.

When COVID hit in March 2020, the nursery had already been exploring online sales casually. They rapidly shifted to a concerted, months-long implementation plan to create an integrated online customer-service experience.

By January 2021, Xsitra had developed a complete POS and e-commerce system for them. It launched a live inventory, pay, and order-processing portal.

As Portland learned, the biggest challenge for online retail sales is maintaining an accurate, live inventory. "Anyone can get a Shopify page up in a matter of hours, and create any number of items," Dunsmuir said. "When you have a physical store and customers are picking up things and walking out, [the challenge is] to keep things updated."

When COVID-19 caused lockdowns, **The Garden Corner** (Tualatin, Oregon) had already been through that struggle. They had launched an online store in 2009. It began as an experiment with a select number of plants and products. Now it has grown to offer 95% of the store's inventory online.

"We did this push forward, without being perfect,





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which is a bit dangerous if you get online reviews,” said owner Jonn Karsseboom. “But, we didn’t want it to prevent us from moving forward.”

Part of that push involved testing several POS systems until settling on Lightspeed, a cloud-based POS system that integrates all aspects of the retail and the online shopping experience.

“When I sell a pansy, the inventory of that particular pansy is subtracted from the inventory,” Karsseboom said. “It is instantaneous. There is no batching at the end of the day. It’s critical that the online and the in-store system see the same thing.”

Wholesale grower **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery** (Aurora, Oregon) also had built an online store before the pandemic hit in April 2019. This established setup foundationally supported its ability to debut online retail store, Little Prince To Go, by 2020. Little Prince worked with its service provider, **Everbearing Services** (Portland, Oregon), which built its website that uses the highly customizable WooCommerce, an open-source e-commerce plugin for WordPress sites.

### Limit the online inventory

Putting together an inventory system doesn’t happen overnight and is not necessarily inexpensive. If specific product quantities aren’t tracked, and sales aren’t monitored at the size and variety level for plants, it’s hard to sell online.

Timothy Howard serves as president of Clarity Connect (Holly Springs, North Carolina), a marketing company and website builder serving the nursery and horticulture industry. He cautions against launching an e-commerce site with one’s full menu of products and merchandise. A more modest upload, equal to 20% of what you carry, is a better idea. Then you can focus on the merchandise and plants customers want most — the ones that are sure to sell.

“It’s still a little bit risky,” Howard said. But, with this model, businesses establish a layer of protection against selling something they don’t have.

One way to create a pool of plants to draw upon is to group them under one head-

ing. For instance, a garden center might sell five or six different varieties of red begonias in the store that would add up to 200 units. If all of those varieties are listed online under a generic “Red Begonia” category, the shop can price the item at the cost of the most expensive variety. Following this example, Howard would then pull orders based on any red begonias in stock — without ever committing to send a particular variety.

“For the average gardener, a red begonia is a red begonia,” Howard said. The goal is to have high fill rates, which is crucial for keeping online customers happy.

### Months of prep to go live

Putting up an e-commerce site is labor-intensive. Your developer should ask detailed questions, then provide a precise, clear, defined scope, with realistic deadlines and an activity timeline for the entire process. It’s possible to put up a website in a few weeks, but the results could fall short of customer expectations and your own.

“Online sales are literally running another store; it is not adding a small feature,” said Karsseboom. “You have to have the grit and aptitude for it.”

Online retail sales need the same analysis for every step of operations as you do with your brick-and-mortar store. That includes mapping the supply chain, packaging of plants and goods, shipping (if that’s done in-house) or pick-up, labor, and training so the company meets the demands and expectations of customers at each stage.

Ron McCabe, owner at Everbearing Services, recommends starting with documenting all the processes and realistic expectations — with an eye to time and

financial commitment — to successfully launch a site. Start by asking questions. Are there photographs that need to be collected, and who will create the plant descriptions? Is there a standardized naming system for plants and items?

On the technology side, a garden center or nursery with a customized accounting system will also require custom code for the e-commerce side, so the two accounting systems speak to each other. Other technical issues McCabe points to include system security, backups, recovery plans, and the process for accepting online payments, so that points of friction are minimized. The harder it is to complete a purchase, the more likely your customer will peel off and quit your site.

The order process, the staging, the shipping, the quality of the plants and how they arrive or are handed to the customer, even the timing of all those steps — all these things have to be predictable.

“There is a difference between getting the website up and being done,” McCabe said.

All systems and processes should be tested before launch.

The goal, in the end, is to create predictability for site visitors. It’s bad if the website says something is in stock after you’ve run out.

“Online is built for the message of ‘always in stock, always available,’” Karsseboom said. “We always have to weigh availability versus online store consistency. If you can’t get it consistently, you may not want it listed.”

There may be a surge in popularity of some obscure plant. As we’ve seen with the recent “houseplant hysteria” hits, there are

rushes on plants of a particular type.

“There’s nothing particularly predictable about those surges, except our *response* has to be extremely predictable,” Karsseboom said.

The kinks and the hiccups require continuous oversight; it never stops — more so than for in-store sales.

Online shoppers are an unforgiving audience, according to Karsseboom.

“There is immediate feedback,” he said. “Because it’s not a physical store, trust is your main currency, and trust is very thin online, and it’s built over time. You’re always nurturing trust. That goes for local pick-up too.”

The big box stores have tight inventory processes and can have an online order ready for pickup in 90 minutes. They might send a text message with specific driving or on-site directions, and may offer reserved parking and other amenities explicitly geared toward curbside pick-up. That’s the kind of service garden centers are competing against.

“Those are the experiences, the expectations, that people have,” Howard said. “They’re probably not going to adjust it significantly for the local garden center.”

And those expectations will probably continue to sharpen over time for what is commonly now called click-and-collect sales. The coronavirus pandemic accelerated the implementation of this type of buying that was in early adoption before 2020. Nonetheless, forecasts are that this convenient form of shopping is expected to experience annual growth of at least 15% by 2024, according to Business Intelligence. The trend is so ubiquitous it earned its own new marketing acronym — BOPIS (Buy Online, Pick-up In Store).

Consider how the BOPIS customer experience has been perfected at this point by stores like Best Buy, Walmart or Safeway. These stores are creating expectations. Howard warns that if

customers have to wait 30 minutes for their order, or half the merchandise isn’t available online, and it seems the plants have been picked over or are leftovers, the company’s brand is going to take a hit. “If you can’t deliver, you will spoil your reputation,” Howard said. “If you can’t do it well, consider not doing it at all.”

### Build your buffers

Digital e-commerce has its advantages. For one, the experience is customizable and programmable. There are several little tricks to protect your brand, improve your reputation and build consumer trust. One is to create cut-offs for items, so you’re not in danger of being short of inventory.

Here’s a math problem Howard used as an example. Suppose 50 20-inch hanging baskets are in the POS on a busy shopping weekend. 15 people walk in to your store and put two each of the baskets into their rolling shopping cart. That leaves 20 on the benches, but the system still thinks 50 are available. Even a reasonably accurate inventory system can get tied up with the calculation. To limit this problem, an item can be programmed as out-of-stock, and unavailable for sale, once it dips below a particular threshold.

Another idea is to limit cart checkout time. Suppose three online shoppers select six 4-inch red begonias. That’s 18 plants to subtract from inventory. The first online customer gets a phone call from a long-lost friend; the second gets up to walk the dog; the third is pulled by the sudden need to take a nap. To avoid the snarl on inventory for items languishing in carts, have the system clearly display a time limit for checkout before the attempted order will be voided, and

the inventory released back to the public. Build buffers for pick-up times, similar to the way garage sales have a 8 a.m. start and a 4 p.m. end time, but people are there ➤

### A quick checklist for a sane adoption of online sales

- Make sure processes are in place.
- Keep the technical aspect as clear as possible.
- Customize to make the process easier.
- Expect a months-long process to go-live.



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## Meeting online customer expectations

30 minutes before and after. To limit negative encounters, create pick-up times that allow you to be truly flexible and tolerant with customers.

Plan for no-shows. “People will not show up, even if they’ve already paid,” Howard said.

An important step then is to build into your pick-up process a way to maintain the health and good looks of pulled plants, so they’ll stay that way when the customer shows up.

### How you pack and ship matters

One aspect both The Garden Corner and Little Prince investigated extensively was packaging and shipping. The process included sending plants to staff and friends, testing boxes with or without heat packs, and occasionally throwing in some durability tests — literally. The staff at Little Prince sometimes pitched the packed boxes across the office at each other to see how plants fared, according to Joan Dudney, marketing manager at Little Prince.

To create a shortcut for the shipping crew, she notes that the custom coding automatically determines the size box to use for shipping orders based on customers’ selection of particular plant combinations. For instance, if someone orders three 3.5-inch *Acaena inermis* ‘Purpurea’ and two 4.5-inch *Ugni molinae* (Chilean guava), the system automatically generates the appropriate size box without requiring the packing crew to ever weigh the order. “We want to make it as easy as possible for the crew,” Dudney said.

Pre-planned box selection is also efficient. To maximize the energies of a set number of crew members, Little Prince limits shipping to two days per week. Retail orders are exported, batched, tagged and put on one master pull slip for shipping on Mondays and Tuesdays. Those days jive with shipping company delivery schedules. The goal is to have plants land at customers’ doorsteps no later than three days from their package date, “healthy and happy,” Dudney said.

This limited shipping schedule requires clear communication to custom-

ers during the online ordering process, and of course, there are always those who will overlook these messages. But, that’s all part of the continuous customer service that any product-based sales operation can expect, according to Dudney.

Portland Nursery used their new online sales system almost immediately to launch a houseplant sale in January 2021. People were able to buy ahead of time and pick up the plants in store.

“It was fairly popular,” Dunsmuir said. He supported the idea of running the sale through spring. “I see online sales growing in the future, even when COVID is over. It’s a different stream to get plants to people.”

Currently, online sales at Portland Nursery are completed curbside, with customers picking up their products. But Dunsmuir sees that changing in the future, with local delivery and shipping available once the kinks are worked out. “We want to get in-store pick-up worked out and then figure out how to do justice with delivery and handling,” he explained.

### Be prepared to wait — or pay

If a goal for your site is immediate recognition, the first necessary step is to write copy with good search engine optimization (SEO).

The second step is paid advertising. When you launch an e-commerce branch of your business, you’re basically nonexistent in the eyes of the internet.

“Just like when you open a shop, it takes time for people to get aware of you. Your sales will grow every year,” McCabe said. “The go-faster button then becomes advertising, either online or through social media.”

But, not everyone wants to be found or enjoys a surge of sales overnight. Once cus-

tomers find the company, the company has to deliver — which can be overwhelming. Little Prince has chosen to gain its retail sales customer base organically through word of mouth and a slowly growing email list.

“We are not being super aggressive,” Dudney said. “We have enough customers for us,” especially given the upsurge in attention during the spring.

It begs the question of how many sales are needed online. The answer determines the amount of energy devoted to the endeavor and how quickly it’s scaled up. If a company moves too fast in hiring people and an inevitable seasonal dip in sales happens, they need something to do — or be prepared to lay them off.

For an operation like Little Prince, whose primary business is wholesale, online sales are another outlet for keeping staff on year-round. Boxing plants is a specialized skillset, but when those staff are not boxing, they are redirected to other tasks around the nursery. For many garden centers and nurseries, online retail sales will become important in the near future. If you have your sights set on e-commerce, this spring season is off the table, but to start somewhere, look ahead toward fall, Howard recommended.

“Work out the kinks when orders have less volume,” Howard said, to be ready for spring 2023. By implementing during the fall, you’re dabbling, and you’ll walk before you run. This way, you make your investments, and your mistakes, without them snowballing out of control during your busiest season. ☺

*Tracy Ilene Miller is a freelance writer and editor who covers several topics, including gardening. She can be reached at [tmillerwriter@gmail.com](mailto:tmillerwriter@gmail.com).*