

Extra Effort

BY Kristy J. O'Hara



How to work with garden centers to better sell your products

Every time a story about food-related illnesses breaks, it's another opportunity for growers to expand their business.

"All of a sudden, the consumer jumps on the wagon and wants to grow a garden," says Jeff Warschauer, vice president of sales for Nexus. "It's like going to the gym right after New Year's – you can't find a parking spot for two months and then the place is empty."

But how do you keep that motivation up for end consumers? How do you keep them excited about growing their own food – or at least trekking to a farmers market or garden center to purchase fresh produce?

Sometimes you can be your own worst enemy when it comes to improving sales. As a grower, you have to learn to provide customers with the best product and then find ways to better market that product.

Warschauer works with garden centers, educating them how to incorporate produce sales as well as other additional sales into their centers to increase revenue.

"There's a shift in the industry, and garden centers are looking for ways to increase exposure to the consumer and get that traffic up and give [customers] a reason to go to the garden center," he says.

Produce Grower spoke with Warschauer about what some of the barriers to the end-consumer are and how to increase sales.

Q What's one of the biggest problems growers face in working with garden centers to sell their product to the end consumer?

A Quite frankly, they're doing a terrible job. Plant quality, coming from the plant knowledge side, you go to look at that and you should be ashamed at the store. It's like the worst thing you can do to the consumer. The roots are barely rooted. It's quick to market, how fast can we grow it to the point that let's just barely ship it so it doesn't die, and consumers get a young, soft plant, and they get lucky if they can put it in the ground and grow it, and people get mad. People blame themselves – they don't know any better. They don't blame the grower or producer because they think they just killed it. Tom Smith [of Four Star Greenhouse] says the worse thing we can do is give the

consumer bad information or bad product, and all they do is blame themselves.

Outside all the smoking mirrors and dog and pony shows our industry does, at the end of the day, we have to sell good product. I don't have a formula on how it would be done, but in layman terms, someone would deliver to the garden center a mature, good variety of fruit and vegetables that the consumer can take home — and either take it home and leave it, and it will produce product or they can put it in the ground and it will produce product.

If I'm the garden center, and I'm buying it from you and you're one of the few people producing,

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Use a refrigerator to offer butters, cheeses and other items to complement your produce.





Produce at Briggs Garden & Home in North Attleboro, Mass. Build up a reputation of providing the best seasonal produce for your local garden center.

seasonal business — it's great. Poinsettias are great at Christmas, but you don't sell a lot of them much before the holidays and you don't sell them after the holidays. I'm not sure why — it's a pretty plant. I think we're our own worst enemy — we don't try to market them after that time of year. A lot of people think that if you do them, it becomes such a common plant that it loses its wow-ness. It's just not nearly as effective and something you can only get a few months out of the year.

Where I live, it's Jersey tomatoes, Jersey asparagus, Jersey peppers, Jersey this, Jersey that — there's roadside stands everywhere. When tomatoes come in, OK you put a big sign up front. You put fliers and advertise, you send out newsletters — 'Not only do we have the jersey tomatoes that finally arrived, we also have great mozzarella, great basil and oil and balsamic.'

You don't have to go hog wild. You can have a nice piece of furniture, and it has a couple nice different types of balsamics, and a couple nice olive oils and you have a small, used, \$1,000 standup or laydown showcase refrigerator that you could put a couple types of buffalo mozzarella in, and there you go. You have your fresh Jersey tomatoes, oil and vinegar, tomatoes and cheese, and when the tomatoes are gone, you're out of the business. No more basil, no more mozzarella, no more tomatoes.

You're going to have sweet corn come later. You see the signs everywhere. When the signs are there, some people will take that small 6-foot-long refrigerated showcase, they may have [different] butters or some different types of things that can go along with corn, and when you're done, you're done.

[One grower] will do corn, tomatoes, local vegetables. He has five or six different chalkboards that are maybe 2 feet tall by 18 inches wide, and he has five or six of those by the product and he has wheelbarrels or pallets with burlap, and he stacks up the corn or the tomatoes and he'll have local squash, local peppers — he may have seven or eight items — but what he's doing is he's bringing in a whole customer base that isn't typically coming for plant material. When they come in and walk past whatever, they've got a great opportunity. That customer wouldn't be there if it weren't for that sign out front that says 'Sweet corn.' And they'll pick up some business from their existing customers and the many reasons you go to a garden center, but seasonal produce is a niche and seasonal produce could be one way you can do five or six items, get in it for two or three months, and get out of it and build up a reputation that every year, come June through fall, you can go to So-and-So's Garden Center and get the best sweet corn or tomatoes — the staples — and that's just awesome. **PG**

I'm also going to buy [other plants]. Say, 'If you buy our tomato plants and vegetable plants, I'll give you a discount on our horticulture plants.' All of a sudden, the customer has more reason to go back to you as the grower. It's a mind shift.

Q What can growers do to get garden centers to buy more finished product?

A You have to promote it, advertisers are trying different things. Chris at Good Harvest Farms does everything. Now he does CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). You come in and pay a fee at

the beginning of the year, and as they produce crops you get a mix. Most don't tell you what that'll be — usually what you get is what you get. If you don't like squash and eggplant, well you're getting it. They call them shares. It's somewhat similar to what they did in the depression — shares for milk, eggs, etc.

It's taken a leap and a bound. If you're not a farmer, you can certainly go to a farmer close by. That's not much different than what you're seeing with some of the garden centers. What better place? You can go where you already have earth and plants and a nice atmosphere. Having farmers markets is a great accompaniment, a great opportunity for garden centers because it aligns itself with our belief. Most garden centers believe things should be local and as good and direct from the earth as it can be.

Q What can growers suggest to garden centers to reach new customers?

A When you're in the produce business, it's like any

