

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

9/19/2008

Thinking Like a Customer

Barbara Mulhern



Being in the business for nearly 30 years hasn't stopped Roger Landsburg from continually looking for ways to differentiate his business from others. Whether it's designing his own shopping carts or understanding the extra effort it takes to sell perennials, Roger, owner of Landsburg Landscape Nursery in Brainerd, Minnesota, knows that a retail grower can never let up on thinking like his customers think.

"We have shopping carts that will hold maybe \$300 worth of product," Roger says of his custom carts. "They'll hold nine flats, several hanging baskets and a couple of bags of soil. They aren't 'skinny' in front and don't nest into each other. They're easy to push and will withstand very rough conditions."

Roger designed the carts, and a local welder built them. "I think they're fantastic," he says. "They're considerably heavier-duty than most shopping carts and don't need any repairs—ever."

Roger and his wife, Marie, are proud of the fact that their son, John, his wife, Tina, and their daughter, Kathryn, are actively involved in running the business. Although Kathryn lives in the Twin Cities (approximately 125 miles south of Brainerd), she does all of their advertising and marketing via the Internet. "Her husband, Rob, has done a big share of our website," Roger adds.

Roger started the business when he was 37 years old. "My goal in life was to be self-employed and to involve my family in a family business," recalls the third-generation horticulturist and former teacher. "I did a lot of landscaping work out of my garage for 14 years when I was teaching, then opened this business in 1979. We started from scratch with 20 acres of dry commercial land you could build on."

Today, Landsburg Landscape Nursery has approximately 50,000 sq. ft. of greenhouses—12 production houses and one retail house that's about 11,000 sq. ft. The nursery does all of its own growing and offers its retail customers a wide variety of product.

"Perennials are a big item for us because they're more of a niche," Roger says. "We have 400 different

varieties and a couple of staff people who do nothing but perennials. One of them has a bachelor's degree in biology and knows all 400 varieties. Perennials need to be 'sold' more than annuals because they're not necessarily at their full point of beauty when customers come in."

Naturally, Landsburg Landscape Nursery also sells a wide varieties of annuals, trees, shrubs and evergreens. "Our selection is very, very complete," Roger says. "We have 20 to 25 different varieties of impatiens and petunias, about 15 different varieties of marigolds and 10 to 15 varieties of geraniums."

In addition to doing landscaping work in the area, they do a lot of custom flower planting, as many of the nursery's customers who walk through the door are at the higher end of the economic spectrum. "They buy big pots, \$100 or more each, and want them looking spectacular the day they get them," he says. Not all of their retail customers fall into the affluent category; many are avid gardeners who have a good understanding of both quality and selection.

Catering to customers

Roger and his family cater to their nursery's customers in a number of ways:

- The aisles in the greenhouses are wide. This helps facilitate "traffic" with the large shopping carts that Roger designed.
- The greenhouse benches are lower than normal so customers can "better see what they are getting."
- All watering in the greenhouses is done at 5 a.m. so plants are no longer dripping when customers begin arriving at 8 a.m. "We've learned that the ladies come in with nice clothes on and don't want to be dripped on. We now have a time clock on our baskets so they all get watered at about 5 a.m.," Roger says.
- Brainerd is located in the "Land of Ten Thousand Lakes" district and many of Landsburg Landscape Nursery's customers are purchasing plants for vacation homes. What this means is that a lot of them don't arrive in the area until after school is out sometime in June. "So we try to have product available that's fresh and perfect through June. We seed and transplant way later than most growers. We start seeding at the end of February and seed all through March and April. We don't discount anything until after the Fourth of July," says Roger.

He offers these additional suggestions for other retail growers:

- In his opinion, newspapers are not a good way to advertise. "Nobody's reading the papers any more. We do Internet coupons that we developed ourselves. We also have a free e-newsletter that comes out every two weeks." In addition, Landsburg Landscape Nursery makes good use of its vans that are out on the road. "A couple of our vans will have actual photos from the inside of our greenhouse covering the sides. These will be scenes of our greenhouse and nursery," Roger says.
- If possible, locate your greenhouses on flat land. Having everything on one level and not needing stairs or ramps makes it much easier and less expensive to transport plants from one greenhouse to another. It also makes it easier for your customers to get around. GT

Barbara Mulhern is a freelance writer from Verona, Wisconsin.