GROWERTALKS

Features

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America's Horticultural Renaissance: The Next Generation

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Gardening and plants are answers to many environmental issues in our urban centers, to happiness and quality of life of our society, and to the health of our populations in the form of fresh fruit and vegetables, exercise and stress reduction. We've become so numbed in the industry by the latest new introductions and what they could possibly mean to a DIY mass merchandiser that we forget the beauty, emotion and connection that flowers and plants deliver to consumers.

Floriculture holds the highest, most honored spot among consumers of all agricultural production. The plants and flowers that growers produce are brought into our society's most intimate and personal spaces as an expression of emotion and personal style and to create an atmosphere of connectedness. But we've become so enamored with the latest calibrachoa or heat-tolerant pansy that we've lost sight of the bigger picture.

Community gardens and public garden plots are likely to become even more important, perhaps, evolving into the permanent urban landscape fixtures you see driving around Northern Europe. Did you know that in 1942 5.5 million American gardeners with WWII Victory Gardens on 20 million garden plots grew nine to 10 million pounds of fruits/vegetables annually, which was at the time 44% of U.S. fresh fruits/vegetables? Interestingly, those gardeners became the base for the American bedding plant industry that began emerging in the 1950s and 1960s. We're in a similar pattern today with scores of new gardeners producing food crops.

The urgency/reality of demographics

Dr. Charlie Hall, Ellison Chair, Texas A&M University does a fabulous job by putting out big-picture topics for American horticulture to mull. Anyone sitting through one of his presentations on marketing cannot walk away without the realization that not only has U.S. floriculture and ornamental horticulture been in an economic recession, but we're also at the crest of the wave in fundamental demographic changes.

Baby Boomers are aging out and downsizing. Generation X right behind them is only 49 million people—64% of market size of Baby Boomers before them (at 76.7 million). Generation Y—the Millennials—are just now forming households and entering the adult consumption economy. At 73.5 million, Gen Y is reshaping U.S. culture just as the Baby Boomers did.

Each of these massive consumer groups applies different value sets and metrics to their consumption. Generation X simply doesn't have the numbers to make up for consumption lost as Baby Boomers age out of the market. While Baby Boomers will continue to be a force for industry consumption and a repository for inherited wealth, we can no longer rely solely on that demographic in the future.

Generation Y sees the world differently. Twenty-five-year-old Gen Ys have spent almost half of their lifetime post-9/11; a fifth of their adult life is marred by economic recession. Since they could read, the Internet has brought the world to their fingertips.

For many Gen Ys, sustainability is not a concept; it's a parameter. They value people, connectedness and experiences. They believe everyone can be famous and known. They understand the idea that things are both functional and a way to express one's individuality. Gen Ys blur the lines. Food is food, not necessarily associated with breakfast, lunch or dinner, the same with clothes and other consumables. They apply technology to every aspect of their lives and they believe the idea that technology is a reflection of society, not a tool (as Boomers think). One Gen Y blogger asks, "Why can't government have an API for that?" (API stands for "application programming interface," which is a set of tools to build computer software applications. Google Maps and Microsoft Windows have their own specific APIs, for example.) Each Gen Y has their own personal stamp.

As TV's "Growing a Greener World" host Joe Lamp'l stated in his keynote address at the OFA Short Course, Generation Y is not so much into gardening. They're into cooking, sustainability, the local food movement, the whole area that's urban agriculture (which is really growing fruits and vegetables with a few chickens and bee hives in the city). They're slow to spend money, but they afford what they want. He suggests the industry approach them where they are.

Opportunities for targeting Urban Ag Millennials

1| Urban beekeeping. Make it easy for someone who wants to start. Beekeepers are friendly and many enjoy mentoring newbies. Finding a beekeeper to work part-time to offer training and one-on-one expertise while selling supplies isn't difficult. Resource: Bee Culture magazine (excellent info on bees in the city, from regulatory issues to instructions on how to do it without bothering neighbors). www.beeculture.com

2| Urban chickens. Offer supplies, classes, and regular meetings for camaraderie among urban chicken keepers. (North Carolina is a haven for urban chickens; this extension publication is very thorough: www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/poulsci/tech_manuals/Backyard_Chickens.pdf)

3| Plant swaps are huge and growing as a way to share "pass-along plants" and create a gardening community. Why not offer die-hard gardeners a spot to have their next plant swap? What gardener can resist visiting a retail greenhouse or garden center and leave without making a purchase? Master Gardeners will know who's coordinating these. At our local plant swap, attendance is across all demographics.

4| Permaculture. It's an old concept that's gaining major traction. In a nutshell, permaculture emphasizes considering the topography of landscape, function of the space and plant assortments to create self-maintaining food production systems in harmony with natural systems. Kitchen gardens can be a type of permaculture. Toby Hemenway literally wrote the book on home permaculture, *Gaia's Garden: A Guide to*

Home-Scale Permaculture. When a home gardener decides to pursue permaculture, what expertise do you offer? Along the same lines, Edible Forest Gardens are gaining traction among a segment, as is Wild Edible Foraging.

5| Composting individual scale. Offer composting and vermi-composting seminars and supplies. Many state Land Grant universities will have a solid waste-composting expert. The U.S. Composting Council has consumer promotions that you may be able to tap into: http://compostingcouncil.org

6| Gardening for pollinators. Think of it as "Butterfly Gardening" on steroids. Pollinators are mandatory for growing food crops. The good news about gardening for pollinators is that flowers are the core. Bumblebees and solitary bees can be a lot of fun. Creating habitat involves planting a wide range of annuals, perennials and woodies to provide nectar from March through October. The Xerces Society (www.xerces.org) is an excellent source for information, although their literature on plants is at times skewed toward native species.

7| Bird and bat habitat. Birders can be a lucrative demographic. The good news about bird food is that it's consumed and must be replaced, which creates regular traffic. But think beyond the 50+ crowd and bird food in attracting urban Millennials. A number of avian species—like swifts, hawks and owls—and mammals—like bats—are important in maintaining urban ecosystems. Helping customers enhance habitat for these types of species goes beyond selling a few birdhouses. Cornell University's Ornithology Lab website is an amazing resource in addition to your local Audubon Society and Natural History Museum.

8| America in Bloom (AIB). AIB offers a great way to create a sense of community across the generations and to connect to the urban gardening public. Consider sponsoring a local AIB effort, either alone or with other horticultural firms in the city. It's also a great way to organize the local horticultural professional community. For everyone, AIB comes across as very authentic. **GT**

Gardens Matter in Wildlife Conservation

The gardening industry/horticulture and gardeners haven't generally been recognized for the environmental benefits that managed landscapes can provide. While literature about the economic and health impacts of plants is accumulating, few have studied the environmental impacts of gardens.

One British gardener, Jennifer Owen—now in her late 70s—is a dedicated gardener and an ecologist living in Leicester, England. Jennifer shares the record of wildlife in her garden in the book, Wildlife of a Garden, where she documents 30 years of the wildlife ecology of her 7,800 sq. ft. garden (0.18 of an acre) from 1972 to 2001.

Her tiny garden has contained an artificial assemblage of 91 plant families (not including grasses) with 410 different species over its 30 years. On average, in any given year, there were 226 flowering plant species (not including grasses). Plants included introduced and native species. She calculated that in the second 15 years, she grew 307 different species total—of them, 240 were introduced and 170 were natives.

Over the course of three decades, she systematically trapped, identified and counted all manner of insects and invertebrates. Overall, she trapped 23 butterfly species, 282 moth species and 915

other insect species. There were 138 species of other invertebrates like spiders, flatworms, earthworms, centipedes, millipedes, snails and slugs. Larger animals included three species of amphibians, 54 bird species and seven mammals.

Using her own data, Jennifer estimates that her garden contains somewhere between 1,680 to 13,050 terrestrial animals of the 30,000 documented species of terrestrial animals in the British Isles based on British Isles ecological records with extrapolations of her own work. In her book, Jennifer theorizes that the patchwork of gardens (estimated at some 960,000 acres) in the British Isles serve as a web of miniature nature preserves at a time when natural habitat for wildlife is rapidly disappearing.

UK Butterfly Surveys (Butterfly Conservation National Garden Butterfly Survey) conducted over 17 years have yielded insights and guidelines for gardeners seeking to create functional butterfly habitats and a list of 200 good nectar plants. One of the most important conclusions was that the best gardens for visiting butterflies include a wide range of nectar plants (30 or more different species). Buddleia proved to be the Number 1 most popular plant.

In the United Kingdom, gardens comprise an estimated 19 to 27% of the entire urban area—they can and do play a valuable role in maintaining diversity and providing habitat for wildlife and plant species.

In addition to the detailed documentation by Jennifer Owen, Sheffield University monitored multiple gardens over several years through their Biodiversity in Urban Gardens in Sheffield (BUGS) study in the early 2000s. Through that effort, a number of gardening practices to increase biodiversity for wildlife especially were identified.

As a producer of flowers and plants, you offer your gardening customers the opportunity to change the world by providing wildlife habitat and sanctuary. **GT**

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