

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Winter's Welcome

Trudy Watt



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"In seed time, learn; in harvest, teach; in winter, enjoy."—William Blake

The inevitability of the approaching chill begins to skirt the periphery of my thoughts again as prebook lists for seasonal greens and potted Grinch trees begin to pop up with more regularity. I'm unsure if we're fortunate to be able to vicariously peek into the next months before most—or does this diminish the alchemy of the upcoming season?

Aside from perusing new poinsettias and 2-in. kalanchoes in deco pots, my time now consists of winter preparation for the greenhouse and final planning for the festive months. I always muse that I have a very unusual job—at the same time I'm evaluating phytosanitary practices, I'm choosing what kind of seasonal fudge flavors customers might be tempted with as they select their next houseplant! Garden center life always consists of varied duties that bring us to the same end: Have we done enough to satisfy our customers, stay on top of expenditures and prepare ourselves for the next season?

Luckily, our garden center is open year-round, with each season looking quite different from the last. I've found autumn, particularly, to be a time of renewal, like a "back-to-school" sort of feeling. The cooling weather seems to revive our staff and energy levels are up. We're taking on greenhouse cleaning and seasonal maintenance with a renewed commitment and keenness. While it's bittersweet to see empty greenhouses, it's tempered by the fact we had a good year, we accomplished our goals and the slate is clean to begin again.

We pull weeds, wash walls and sanitize floors with the ambitions of taking insights from the spring and applying these to next year's crops. Every one of our employees are encouraged to contribute to the assessment of our past growing season. With each newly arrived growers' catalog (paper copies and sticky notes are a tactile delight!) comes our chance to inspire gardeners and tempt outdoor decorators with new plant combinations. Roofs are checked and furnaces serviced in preparation for the protracted winter season. It may be freezing outside, but the greenhouse will be full of life.

Garden centers have rightly asserted their position as marketplaces that offer specialty foods, fashion and trendy home décor, and we're a proud part of this group. Preparing for our winter commences with obligatory inventory counts and winterization of facilities, but it also includes detailed preparations for all the seasonal workshops and classes that will be filled with enthusiastic learners.

During the spring, we keep an eye out for staff that have an aptitude for exceptional customer service, as they're the assets needed to make our Christmas and winter season successful. Does the newest hire in perennial sales love to work with children or is there someone on the cash staff that has floral design skills? Is there a foodie currently watering the tropicals? It's gratifying when we discover hidden talents of our coworkers and encourage them to be part of the second half of our year.

Putting together a winter customer care team that embodies our core values allows us to help our customers learn, to have an inspiring shopping experience and to feel like they're valued visitors to our garden center. We've created a company culture of collaborative learning and customer-centric practices that have kept shoppers and their children and grandchildren coming back for 40 years.

Preparing for winter means we've come to the end of spring's hustle and are entering a time of renewed intent for the frosty months to come. Prebooks of liners, seed and grower's supplies are nearly finalized, and we've curated new spring collections of horticulture essentials to entice ardent gardeners. Before long, the pallets of fresh greens will arrive and our greenhouse becomes infused with the vitalizing scent of fresh cut boughs. The outdoor plant sales areas will soon be raked and tidied, readied for ice sculptures and sleigh rides. Most of the seed racks are depleted and put away, and the bags of ice melt have been shipped.

It's almost time to put the spring order summaries to the side and receive winter as it displaces our balmy fall with brisk temperatures and shorter days. It seems as though spring is so far away, but before we know it, we'll be back into production and our frenzied schedules will again consume us. Taking a little time now to decelerate and think about all we've accomplished this year is a requisite part of reminding myself of where we've been and where we plan to go. The garden center life is demanding, and not everyone understands it, but it's a life that celebrates each season and allows us to bring everyone along for the incredible ride. **GT**

Trudy Watt has a Bachelor of Horticulture and is a Canadian Accredited Floral Designer. She's worked as an educator, a grower and in retail horticulture for over 30 years. She's most at home in a garden center, connecting people with plants.