

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Selling the Unusual

Katie Elzer-Peters



Seth Godin, a marketing and consumer behavior expert has written several blog posts about “the regular kind.” It’s the brand of [INSERT PRODUCT NAME HERE] that everyone thinks of when they think of [PRODUCT NAME]. The “regular kind” can vary slightly depending on where you live. For example, when it comes to ketchup, if you’re a Pennsylvanian, Heinz is “the regular kind.” In Indiana, it might be Red Gold. (Each is produced in the respective states.)

He’s not wrong. People like “the regular kind.”

The glow-in-the-dark Firefly Petunia.

NOT the Regular Kind

What happens when what you’re selling isn’t “the regular kind”?

Well, there are a couple different ways a plant might not be “the regular kind.”

One is much more straightforward than the other: same plant, new colorway. Same plant, new growth habit. Same plant, new or novel presentation. On that last point: Home Depot had willow “fences” in pots this spring. I wasn’t the only one who noticed them. Several friends posted pictures on social media with a variation on the caption, “I WANT this, but where would I PUT this?”

The other is to be something else entirely.

Not a new colorway.

A new . . . organism.

For this article, I interviewed Susie Raker, founder and co-owner of Rooted In Solutions. You know her as Vice President of Raker-Roberta’s Young Plants, but she founded her new company in May 2024, specifically to bring the new Firefly Petunia to market.

“We’re a full-service firm for all of the plant oddities,” she said.

Firefly Petunia is definitely not “the regular kind.” It is a plant oddity, for sure.

I’d been kicking around the idea of selling the unusual since talking with one of the growers of Firefly Petunia liners last year. They mentioned the challenge of selling what looks like a regular petunia—actually what looks like a rather anemic white petunia—for almost 10 times the cost of a regular petunia.

“You can’t sell it like a regular petunia,” I told them. “You have to make it an event!”

Imagine my delight when Susie said the same thing. She added, “You can’t sell it like a regular petunia because it isn’t a regular petunia. It’s a bioluminescent plant.”

Now THAT is an event.

This isn’t a commercial

We’re talking plenty about Firefly Petunia because it’s the most extreme edge case of selling the unusual there is right now. But the principles behind what sells Firefly will sell the living willow hedge or the new hydrangea or the carnivorous plant or the next unusual item to come along.

Before the ideas, let’s talk about why even bother trying to live on the edge and grow and sell the unusual because it’s a risk to look beyond “the regular kind.”

“Our customers DO value our products”

The pre-tissue culture pandemic frenzied world of Pink Princess Philodendron mania showed that consumers were willing to drop coin on unusual plants. Remember the days of \$200 prices for a 4-in. pot? That wasn’t completely about the plants. It was also about the hype. Hype for an object that happened to be a plant. Trophy houseplants were—and still are—sold very much out of context of other plants. They’re sold at boutique plant shops, or on Instagram Lives or at PlantCons.

As a grower, most of what you sell is being offered in the context of other plants. That creates a double-edged sword for some new items, especially bioengineered plants. On the one hand, end-use customers know it’s a plant. On the other hand, there’s a lot of suspicion around genetically engineered anything and a general lack of comprehension on how new varieties of plants are developed, even without bioengineering.

Raker said, when it comes to the Firefly Petunia, the “petunia-ness” of it actually has to be overcome within the context of selling near other plants.

“Our industry has commercial standards for genetics,” said Susie. “Bioengineers don’t know those standards. This product was a decade in the making. It was engineered on the chassis of petunia standards from 10 years ago. It is not as vigorous as other petunias on the market today.”

If you set Firefly next to other petunias, it actually looks like a crummy petunia. How did one garden center sell over \$70K of them in less than a day?

Context gives cues to consumers and shapes their perception. If something looks like a plant and acts like a plant, even if it’s also something else—a bioluminescent plant, a purple tomato, a willow trained into a fence or an apple tree trained into a bench—unless proven otherwise, customers will treat the plant-looking thing like a regular plant.

When retail customers buy into the story surrounding the plant, they’ll pay a premium. That means expanding the context beyond the bench. The garden center that sold \$70K in Firefly Petunias? They did that.

I'd argue that there are opportunities for growers to sell THE REGULAR KIND at higher prices, too, if you can get your retailers to think beyond the bench.

Honestly, everyone needs to think beyond the bench and Susie agrees.

"There is a big disparity between what our customers want and what we're giving them," she said.

While we're still over here trialing new versions of salvia, our customers are clamoring for something interesting and unique. Why else would they bring in AI-generated photos of orange hostas and ask us for them?

To sell the unusual make it an event

If this article were on the flip side in *Green Profit*, I'd go into great detail about how to merchandise unusual plants, how to throw a party to introduce them to your customers, how to send emails hyping up your new offering.

Oh, wait—I'm going to do that here, too, because you can ALSO benefit from the same tactics retailers use, though you'll execute on those tactics slightly differently than you would as a garden center. It should go without saying, but the more plants your customers sell, the more plants you can sell to your customers.

"You can't sell Firefly as a petunia. You have to sell it as a FOMO [Fear of Missing Out] item," Susie said. That, she said, is how you get \$29.99 for a 4-in. pot of what looks like a not-so-vigorous petunia.

"If you put it on the bench with other white petunias, your customers won't understand what they're looking at." It needs to be away from the other petunias.

"Give it an endcap. Have an evening event. Now you've made gardening a 24-hour pastime instead of a daytime hobby," Susie said. "Night gardens are having a moment right now," said Heather Prince, a garden speaker, writer and email manager for my company. "I have lost track of how many times I've given my moonlight garden talk." (Need a talk? Get in touch with her: heather@fearlessgardening.net).

At trade shows, growers of Firefly Petunia are creating dark rooms where people can actually see the plants glow. It's not enough to tell your wholesale customers about something; you have to help them experience it through the eyes of THEIR retail customers.

One grower that excels at this is Prides Corner Farms. Katie Dubow, president of Garden Media Group, said, "Pride's Corner Customer Days are a masterclass in how growers can engage their retail partners. By bringing 400-plus garden center customers to their facility, showcasing new plants and investing in education through speakers and hands-on displays, they inspired lots of new ideas! Overall, excitement is high for next year."

As a grower, isn't that what you want?

Bailey Nurseries* is a plant brand that does this with pull-through marketing that is, quite frankly, often delightfully over-the-top. As I polish off this article, they're setting up for an event at Ladurée in SoHo in New York City to welcome city slickers and tourists to experience a garden oasis in the middle of the city.

It's not an accident that Bailey introduced the Eclipse Hydrangea to the retail market in 2024, the year of the total solar eclipse with a path across much of North America. Eclipse fever was at its peak. No extra event needed. The work for that started long before 2024, obviously, but growers AND retailers knew they'd be able to make a big

splash with the plant.

To sell the unusual re-imagine what you're selling

A pop-up garden at a trendy macaron store? That's a re-imagining of the power of plants. Gaultheria procumbens or Wintergreen packaged in holiday deco pots? That's a re-imagining. Eucalyptus as a houseplant? There's something new. (Find both of those from Qualitree, a big grower in Canada.) Susie's growing Firefly as a houseplant.

"I never thought of a petunia that way, but I've had several going for eight months inside now," she said.

A real-live snack tree in your backyard? That's the experience Plants Nouveau wanted consumers to picture when they named their line of skinny, small fruit trees Fruit Snacks. They're not selling trees, they're selling snacks. Everybody loves snacks!

"A product that's unusual deserves its own playbook of creative solutions," Susie said. "If something doesn't work, try a different angle. Have the discipline to keep going. It'll pay off if you're willing to take the risk."

*My company provides email marketing for Bailey Nurseries, but we are not involved in product launch strategy. **GT**

Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner and Heather Prince is the email manager for The Garden of Words, LLC, a digital marketing company for the green industry. They've built thousands of grower emails over the years. Have questions? Get in touch: katie@thegardenofwords.com.