

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Harmonizing the Relationship

Martha Hoffert

Is it me because I have this need to please everyone? Or is it because, at times, there's a disconnect between the growers and landscape designers? As growers, are we too focused on garden centers and the needs of the retail consumer while discounting landscapers? Does the smorgasbord of information on the Internet provide designers with too many options for growers to keep up?

As the Perennial Production Manager at a major production/wholesale/retail nursery in Southeast Michigan, these are the questions I ask myself every year. I think, "This is the year we nailed it," and every other year I'm reminded that we indeed did not "nail it."

This year, our nursery is offering over 200 genera, over 600 species and varieties in #1, #2 and #3 gallon pots. Our sizes are determined by the plant and customer input, and we spend weeks preparing the menu for our "To Grow List." We select only the finest cuts of the new varieties, the best of the vintage plants, a side of native, and seasoned with the top-selling varieties to bring you our well-crafted menu of perennial options.

However, as quotes start pouring in, it becomes apparent that we can supply about 30% of the plants on the list. Crestfallen, we scramble to find plants and quote the job. I feel like I'm on a hamster wheel!

Questions abound like, what caused the shortfall? And where does the fault lie? Does the issue go away if we simply "pick a lane" and provide service to either the landscape market or the retail sector? Do we narrow our mix and not try to grow varieties that reside out of our comfort zone? Will customers go elsewhere if we can't offer everything on their shopping list? These are the concerns of a grower intent on making our nursery a one-stop-shop for all our customers.

My questions to designers are:

- How often do you visit local nurseries to see what they grow?
- Are suitable substitutions acceptable?
- Can you let us know of specific expectations?
- Can you work with us?

My questions for contractors are:

- Can you inform us of your needs as soon as you get the job?
- Can you afford enough time to grow it properly?

- Are there circumstances that will delay delivery when this order is scheduled to ship?
- If you cannot take delivery, can you keep us posted on the job status?
- Can you guarantee you'll take all that we grow, so we don't have to nurture or discard plants that aren't in our normal lineup?
- Can you work with us?

I recently reached out to landscape architects and designers and asked them these questions. Kenito Morimanno from Lucia Landscaping summed it up: "What can nurseries do for me? They play a crucial role in my firm's development and that is why I am committed to selecting only the very best (and those) that are willing to work with me. I like to develop a good solid 'trust' relationship with them so that if I cannot be available, I can absolutely KNOW they are going to select a plant that adheres to MY standards."

Building a solid relationship, however, requires a good bit of give and take. The best way to incentivize designers to be willing to alter a plan to meet the nursery's offerings is to develop a relationship that's founded on trust. The client must have enough faith in my knowledge to accept what I tell them. Developing that level of trust takes time.

Trust is also a two-way street and we've been burned in the past by customers that have long since weeded themselves out of our customer list. These are the "bad actors" that make us reluctant to do special orders. We've all experienced customers like them, but the customer with whom you develop a mutual respect transforms the business into a wonderful partnership. These are the people with whom you can make magic!

I often refer to plants as the paint an artist uses to produce a "Masterpiece of Nature." Sounds hokey, but we've all seen and experienced the magic. It's wonderful and the best tool in our toolbox to accomplish the task is simple communication. This is sometimes easier said than done when we're all trying to pack 16 hours of work into a 14-hour day, but we need to always keep an open line of communication.

Typically, a plant list is presented to me through the contractor, who in turn was provided information from the designer. Unfortunately, the depth of their discussion is an unknown to me. If a plant in the plan is somehow unavailable, it becomes a challenge if we take ourselves so seriously that we cannot consider a close substitute. (Such as Echinacea Salsa Red for Sangrita. I understand the vision that's trying to be achieved and I will not recommend Magnus. I am your partner, partner!)

Another situation that feeds into the disconnect is when we're asked to grow varieties that have been out of cultivation for decades. This happens! Once, I had to provide letters from the breeders stating the selection was no longer in cultivation and therefore no longer available.

These are a few of the situations that frustrate me and relate back to information that's found on the Internet. In this case, the designer had seen articles about the plants online, but didn't check the date they were published. Never mind the article was posted in 2012.

This situation isn't typical, but they're out there and we must deal with them for the sake of the customers. How we choose to deal with the issues is up to us as individuals. Over the years, I've tried to get inside the inner circle to gain a better understanding of how things work for our clients, but haven't had much success.

Knowledge is key, but since this is my last season before I retire, it may be a little late in my current capacity. This Boomer often wonders with all the methods of communication available, why does it seem that we're doing less of it? Were we more in tune when we were using rotary dial phones and sending messages on fax machines? I'm all for texting, but I sometimes get lost with the abbreviations ... IDK, LOL! Some conversations need to be more personal. The Green Industry has always been about personal relationships.

We all want to make the world a more beautiful place regardless of the hat we wear. As growers, designers, contractors and sales reps, we can appreciate the fact that plants bring joy and well-being to the people who encounter them. This makes it imperative for us to work together to understand the hurdles we face collectively. **GT**

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