

GROWERTALKS

Features

1/1/2023

Resources to Share

Katie Elzer-Peters



When your customers sell more plants, you sell more plants. How can you help make that happen? (Yes, you're on the correct side of the magazine!) We're talking about IGCs, but specifically, the types of resources growers can provide to IGCs to help the IGCs sell more plants.

"What worked four years ago in that realm doesn't work today," said Chason Johnson, Director of Sales and Marketing at Johnson Nursery in North Carolina. Luckily, Chason shared with us what does work, as did Jamie Heflin, Marketing Project Supervisor at Midwest Groundcovers in Illinois; Ryan McEnaney, Marketing and Communication Manager at Bailey Nurseries in Minnesota; and Joan Dudney, Director of Sales and Marketing at Little Prince of Oregon Nursery in Oregon.

Pictured: Check out Panoramic Farm's weekly "Crop Photos." They include a link in each email and archive each week on their website so the images are available as needed for clients.

<https://www.panoramicfarm.com/crop-photos>

A concept Chason spoke about that, at first glance seems to belong squarely in a retail context, is the idea of "Plants Plus." People are buying plants, but they're also buying intangible benefits. For consumers, that might be joy, decor, sympathy, welcome, etc.

B2B customers are also buying Plants Plus. B2B Plants Plus looks a little different: support with POP, curated collections for easy purchasing, services like SMS alerts, or weekly emails with photos they can grab and use on social media or in their weekly emails.

Challenges with the supply chain, upheavals from COVID accelerating behavioral changes in consumers, economic headwinds and labor issues have all mashed growers, retailers, public gardens, brands, suppliers, brokers and consumers into a new, more intimate proximity. That presents opportunities and challenges. The growers that graciously gave their time for interviews walk the talk of working together with IGCs. Here are their ideas for growers

of any size to implement.

Share digital content, especially photos

Jen Polanz, Managing Editor of *Green Profit*, shared that during a recent Garden Center Group annual meeting several garden center staff members said that they could really use help from growers in the way of easily accessible photos.

“They’re all working to get plants online,” she said.

You might be asking, “Is e-commerce really still a thing?” Dr. Alex Grygorczyk from the Vineland Research & Innovation Centre in Ontario presented research results at the 2022 Canadian Greenhouse Conference that indicate that, yes, customers do browse garden center e-commerce sites, especially to scope out choices prior to visiting the store. No pictures on the website can very well lead to no trip to the garden center.

You do not, however, have to all of the sudden pivot from being a plant grower to a content-producing machine or keep a professional photographer on staff. In fact, Dr. Grygorczyk’s research backs that up! Her research shows that customers respond more favorably to realistic, real-world images of plants than stock photos because the photos you snap with your phone show a product closer to what consumers will find when shopping at the garden center. This is a HUGE help to IGCs because your pictures help accurately set customer expectations.

The way you share pictures and info depends on your size as a grower, budget and tech resources. No matter your size, there are ways to get the information to your IGC customers in a way that works for all parties. Here are some ideas:

- **Create complete listings and plant information on your website.** IGC customers can save and use that info.
- **Set up a Google Drive or Dropbox Folder with assets.** Saunders Brothers, the growers behind NewGen Boxwood, offer a Google Drive folder with brand assets from logos to photos. Johnson Nursery is amping up their photo offerings this year. “Customers are definitely asking for the pictures,” says Chason.
- **Build a password-protected area of your website.** Bailey Nurseries is re-launching the section of their website that offers content for retailers. That content will be available for buyers purchasing plants from licensed growers as well, providing help to two rungs of the horticultural industry ladder.
- **Add photos to your weekly email.** Panoramic Farm in North Carolina always includes photos of plants in their yard in their weekly email. They also link to a page on their website called “Crop Photos.” Individual emails link to that week’s set of photos, but all weekly pages are linked on the main Crop Photos page. Text on the page encourages sharing, “Share this week’s Crop Photos post on social media and tag us at #pfcropphotos!”
- **Post great photos on social media and encourage re-posts and repurposing.** Joan from Little Prince says she sees their retail garden center customers repost all the time. “It’s easy for them.”
- **Start a video series.** Midwest Groundcovers produces the Midwest Garden Pro series to help buyers (IGCs, landscapers and even consumers that find the videos) understand how to use their plants. “Proven Plant Partners” is a subcategory of their video strategy and dives into pretty specific plant use cases. The Native Residential Matrix video synthesizes hard-to-find information in a quick, easy-to-digest way. The information is useful for buyers deciding what to stock and to consumers wondering how to solve a particular problem in their landscape. Videos are great for pull-through marketing.

There’s a good chance you’re already—even partially—doing many of the suggestions mentioned above. In 2023, choose one or two initiatives to intentionally focus on. Check in with your customers about what’s helping them the

most and what small tweaks could make your offerings even more useful.

Help plants sell themselves

“Garden centers are unbelievably strapped for staff,” said Chason.

“Anything that helps plants go from the rack to the bench without extra labor for pricing and tagging is a winner,” said Joan.

- **Pre-stick tags:** Little Prince and Johnson offer a retailer-specific tagging and pricing service, and it’s popular with both. They also both offer branded plant tags and pots. Little Prince created their own branding, including categories such as Ground Control for groundcovers, Blades of Glory for grasses and sedges, Water Misers for drought-tolerant plants, and more.

“This branding, including our recognizable tags and social media posting, encourages consumers to seek out our plants at garden centers,” Joan says. “The branding also helps consumers understand exactly how to use the plants.”

- **Offer POP:** Something that licensed growers of branded plants can do for their customers is to point wholesale customers toward POP, signage, videos and assets created by the licensor. While the wholesale customer might buy from a grower, often those assets are available directly from the brand.

“In 2023, we’re offering more vertical signage for garden centers,” said Ryan. “Most of our plants are woodies and they’re usually toward the back of the garden center. Elevated signage, such as an arbor we created, helps pull customers through the garden center and to the product.”

Ryan said their videos are also widely used. “I’ve been walking through a garden center and have seen a Bailey video playing on a loop on a television.” As growers, you don’t have to create these resources—you just have to alert your customers they exist.

- **Create collections:** During high season, Little Prince gathers what they call “The Chosen Ones” in their weekly availability. It’s what’s looking great and likely to fly off the shelves at an IGC. For 2023, Bailey built a merchandising calendar for the First Editions brand that indicates which plants will be looking good and when, divided by region, so that buyers can plan to receive plants at the peak of retail readiness without doing their own complex analysis of plant characteristics.

Offer support—in person and online

Johnson Nursery staff will attend garden center events to answer customer questions. Little Prince takes part in community and industry events. Midwest Groundcovers hosts and attends industry field days and educational events, and makes sure to publicize these events in their weekly emails.

“You have to stay current with what’s going on in the rest of the industry to support your customers,” Jamie said.

A few years ago, Ryan hit the road in an Endless Summer branded van, visiting garden centers to deliver product, help merchandise and meet and greet garden center staff.

From a spontaneous garden center drop-in while you’re out doing errands to a “like” on social media to an organized event presence, showing up for retail customers after the plants have left your facility goes a long way toward solidifying relationships and building successful businesses—for the grower and the retailer. **GT**

Katie Elzer-Peters is the owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a green-industry digital marketing agency. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com.