

Say "Yes" to Fresh

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When Christmas rolls around, people like to reach back to their childhood, or so says Mark Landa, owner of Boulevard Flower Gardens in South Chesterfield, Virginia. "We sell a lot of fresh cut Christmas trees, but we've had increasing sales of fresh and locally grown greens, as well." Mark and his crew have developed innovative ways to keep the greens going out the door throughout the holiday season. That's music to the ears of Shannon Khurt, vice president of M&M Wintergreens, Inc. She recently started a Pinterest account to showcase ideas for her customers selling fresh cut greens. Rick Dungey, public relations manager for the National Christmas Tree Association, sees opportunity for garden centers in the fresh-cut business and an opportunity to attract new customers who aren't being served elsewhere.

This all points to an untapped market for end-of-year sales at garden centers. Say "yes" to fresh this fall for a strong fourth quarter. Here's how to do it.

Identify your Market—Including New Markets

Stocking and selling fresh greenery during the holidays has less to do with the greens themselves than the way they are marketed and sold. "There are many people who would choose fresh over artificial if they knew there were other options beyond an 8-foot-tall, 6-foot-wide tree," Rick says. "The industry, as a whole, is getting better at realizing that there are other opportunities for sales."

Positioning is key. Rick suggests creating a corner of the store for apartment dwellers and those with smaller houses.

"Selling smaller tabletop trees that come with an already attached stand presents opportunities to reach out to new customers or increase sales to existing customers," he adds.

Smaller trees are ideal for college dorm rooms, use in children's rooms or for areas that aren't decoration focal points, such as the kitchen. They're also popular with apartment and condo dwellers. Skinny trees are perfect for people with limited space. Just because a tree isn't your favorite pick doesn't mean one of your customers won't love it.

Offer Something Different

Shannon at M&M Wintergreens is on a mission to help garden centers help customers get more out of their fresh holiday greens. For her OFA trade show booth, she prepared three merchandising areas to showcase fresh greens used in November, December and January. She has applied the "Thriller, Spiller, Filler" concept to indoor and outdoor arrangements made with fresh greens, demonstrating design options with accessories including birds, painted twigs, fall leaves, winter berries, and more.

"Porch pots" are a popular trend, primarily from the Midwest to the East Coast. These are a cross between floral centerpieces and container gardens assembled with fresh greenery and floral department accents. In terms of markup, porch pots are winners. For a few dollars worth of greens and a pot, you can sell a \$35 to \$50 grab-and-go festive container.

Hiawatha Evergreens unveiled a new line of "Go Greener Holiday Hanging Baskets" this year, which include freshly cut greens in a bamboo composite (not plastic) basket. The "Go Greener" line is an extension of its already popular holiday hanging baskets. Garden center customers are becoming more open to the idea that hanging baskets can be an option, even in the winter.

Create an Experience

Lynne Phillips from Natural Art Garden Center in Toms Brook, Virginia, has had great success promoting miniature garden classes around the holidays. "Our customer's daughter made all of her family gifts at one of our miniature garden classes," she adds. They offer accessories for the gardens made locally, and this year they're having miniature poinsettia trees grown specifically for the mini gardens.

They hold classes open to the general public and "host your own" classes, which are, essentially, private parties for groups. "Instead of planning a party at home, cooking and cleaning and stressing, they can just invite their friends to a party at the garden center," Lynne says. In addition to the mini gardening classes, Natural Art Garden Center also offers classes with fresh greenery including wreath decorating, making kissing balls and creating centerpieces. "We have some groups that come back every year for our classes. It's become a tradition."

Make it Easy

The DIY approach takes center stage at Boulevard Flower Gardens. All the fresh cut greenery and berries are artfully arranged in wreaths, swags,

garlands and other pieces for sale. These are displayed on a wall, below which are buckets filled with bundles of the materials used to make or accent the fresh décor. “Designate one area of the garden center as the ‘wreath station,’” Mark recommends. “Don’t make people have to walk from the garden center to the floral department to the gifts area to build a perfect centerpiece or wreath. Gather everything they need to finish the project in one place.”

When you sell fresh greenery and fresh cut Christmas trees at a garden center, you’re not competing with big box stores and Boy Scout troops. If someone chooses to buy from a discount chain, it’s for price. You can’t compete on price. If someone buys wreaths or a tree from the Boy Scouts or a church group, it’s to support those groups. Your customers are the people looking for something different—a different shape, a different color or a different type of tree. Your customers want you to deliver their tree and help set it up for them. They want the personal touch. “We take all of our customers on a tour of the tree lot. We ask what they need, where they’ll be putting the tree, and what size they’re looking for. We do a lot of hand holding—we find each individual a tree that works for his or her situation,” Lynne says.

More than a Shopping Trip

“It’s a mistake to think of Christmas tree shopping as a shopping experience. It’s not an experience. It’s a tradition,” reminds Rick from the National Christmas Tree Association. “Once a year, the family goes to pick out the tree that will stay in their living room for the month of December. What will you do that separates the experience they have with you from the experience they have somewhere else?” **GP**

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