

Plant Product Trends from the Salesman's Viewpoint

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Customer opinions can tell us how well we are really doing. I felt a recent customer comment to me reflected a trend in today's market. "Our industry needs to move into the 20th Century." The customer wasn't even asking for the 21st Century.

Another customer said, "Maybe we are going back to the way it was some years ago when most of the industry relied on the wealthy and the people interested in large, unusual specimen material. The average homeowner will not be able to afford landscaping."

Today there is a very different approach to buying from previous times. Customers are not in a hurry. They are waiting much longer after they buy a home before they buy plants. And they are buying more carefully. Many contractors are watching their inventories. Some do not carry inventory but buy when they get the jobs.

Retailers are thinking turn-over. Trade show business has been slow in the early part of 1993. We hope business at the winter shows will be brisker.

Many growers who used rewholesale yards as their major customers are now selling directly to retailers and contractors and providing them timely delivery.

More nursery sales representatives are on the road now than ever before. Some growers who never before had salespeople now have several covering the same territories.

I suppose my job was easier in the eighties. I didn't think it could get any harder, but it has.

In various areas where I sell, the popularity of some plants is waning. Black and Austrian pines are two examples.

Some varieties are losing favor because of bad press. Dogwood and hemlock have both suffered. Damage from deer is slowing the sales of taxus. Other animals also cause damage that results in slow sales of their favorite plants. Overproduction and poorly grown and improper varieties have cut rhododendron sales. Homeowners get tired of losing expensive plants.

These are not our only problems. We need to sell our plants! We have been very fortunate. Plants tend to sell themselves. Just think how well we could do if we had trained, enthusiastic sales people on the retail level instead of uninformed uninterested help. I hope our future is not selling through the mass merchandisers. I doubt they will ever have adequately trained help. Our independents must do better than that. The mass merchandisers would not be in the position they are with our products today if growers had not overproduced.

Predictions are that by mid-1994 there will be a building boom and that more households will have more money to spend than in the past several years. We shall see!

The future for growers, retailers, and landscape contractors depends on their proceeding with an up-scale attitude. This is the only way.

Quality will sell. Businesses that do not believe so and do not furnish their customers quality plants are doomed.

Growers who produce quality plants for this market will draw the better retailers and contractors. The upper-scale customers usually pay better also.

The public is better educated about our products than ever before, and consumers are going to demand plants that have better quality and provide lasting beauty.

Growers who are doing well now are those with excellent quality, a good variety mix, and quick delivery response.

We all hear that color is selling. Retailers tell us that they make more profit per square foot from annuals and perennials. We must help develop ways to make sales turn over faster at the retail level.

We need to improve tagging on our plants. More information on colorful, interestingly shaped plastic tags large enough to be visible would help.

Signage at the retail level must improve. Area signs giving location of plants according to use or flowering characteristics are categories that could be used.

How about more color charts? We have them for shade trees, crabapples, and rhododendron. How about some for azaleas, crapemyrtles, and Japanese maples?

How about usage charts indicating good screening materials, ground covers, winter gardens, or small ornamental trees? Or, to increase summer traffic, summer-blooming plants and fall planting charts to help customers plan ahead.

Growers in the lucrative eighties produced easy-to-grow, fast-growing varieties in large quantities. In many cases these were not the most desirable plants.

Today growers are looking at production differently. They are lining out slower-growing, hard-to-find plants.

I see a market for plants suitable for the smaller gardens of plant fanciers. Screening materials, NOT white pine, and quality trees, NOT Bradford pear, will be in demand.

An idea to expand the fall market is to include berried hollies in nice containers with distinctive shapes for late fall and Christmas sales.

Other items that have rarely been pushed are:

- Azalea cultivars that extend blooming time or have dwarf growing habits.
- Crapemyrtles in blooming sizes in containers. There are several new cultivars that would be suitable.
- Boxwood in assorted sizes and shapes such as pyramids, columns, spreaders, and even topiary.
- Fir cultivars that are not now on the market. Try to buy a Nordmann fir.
- Camellias in good cultivars and good sizes.
- Deciduous hollies. These need to be shown and promoted to the public.
- Espaliered plants more suitable than we have offered in the past.
- Witch hazels, yews, magnolias and atlas cedars might be worth trying.
- Nandinas are selling well but could do better with the newer cultivars. They add a great deal of interest and are underproduced.
- *Cercis canadensis* hybrids are coming on the market and are selling. 'Flame' and 'Silver Cloud' are examples.
- Southern magnolia cultivars, including 'Bracken's Brown Beauty,'

'Edith Bogue', 'Victoria', and 'Little Gem' are great plants and are selling well. When some of the new deciduous magnolias, including the new yellows, become available, they will sell.

- The new red or pink kousa dogwood can't miss, if there really is one.
- Japanese maple varieties are in very limited supply although there are many varieties that could be grown.
- Other little-grown plants that could add variety and interest to the product mix include: *Clethra barbinervis*, *Acer griseum*, *Stewartia*, and *Pterocarya*

Trends. Many of my retail buyers tell me women are their best customers. To attract women, plants must be clean, easy to handle, and transport.

If we do our part as growers and provide top-quality plants, retailers who have enthusiastic, informed, people-oriented employees in a well-groomed marketplace with timely advertising and reasonable prices can succeed in today's more challenging sales environment.