

New Marketing Ideas to Meet the Needs of Our Changing Nursery Industry

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INTRODUCTION

The nursery industry has always been a dynamic industry that has had to constantly follow the fads and fashions of the gardening public and landscape industry as well as keep up with the technology of the industry and the lifestyles of our customers. Our large nurseries are getting larger, our midsize nurseries are struggling to find the best size to maintain profitability while still being able to compete with the big nurseries, and our small nurseries are looking for niches. Our industry is so large and diverse that there is still a place for everyone but we must be more creative, use more of our horticultural skills, concentrate on quality, and use marketing skills to create our niches.

TRENDS IN THE INDUSTRY

Nurseries compete with each other through quality, production, and transportation costs. It is difficult for small nurseries to compete in the area of production due to the advantage of economy of scale held by the larger nurseries. Buying in large quantities allows nurseries to realize substantial discounts on all production supplies. Their costs are also spread out over a larger number of plants. A small nursery has the competitive option of reducing transportation costs by offering personal, convenient service to a local clientele and providing higher quality plants. The other option is to find a niche. You can choose not to compete, do something a little different and take advantage of your horticultural skills, creativity, and artistic talents. We are fortunate in our industry that our options in this area are only limited by our imagination.

It is interesting and helpful in making the choice of which niche to pursue — to first, study and observe trends in our industry and our society. Perennials, which were at one time a cottage industry, are now mainstream. Where they were once grown in blocks of 100 plants or less in a plantsman's back yard nursery, they have now moved to blocks of several 1000 and have become part of the mega nurseries' product mix.

Mass market retailers, who at one time devoted a small section of their floor space to poor quality plants and gardening items, now employ all their marketing skills and financial resources to exploit this market of unlimited potential. They now devote more space to higher quality plants and are providing trained people to sell and service these products. Where our industry overwhelmingly defeated the marketing order to promote our products, these large retailers have moved in to fill that need by bombarding our spring gardeners with horticultural TV ads and sponsoring gardening programs and an entire cable channel, HGTV. This has been good for our industry. It has certainly contributed to the trend of making our larger nurseries larger, but the greater contribution has come by making products more easily available to the gardening public and reaching people who would not have made a special trip to their local garden center. The florist segment of our industry

discovered and has been profiting and enjoying this market for many years. How many people currently buy flowers and flower arrangements from their local grocery store, who previously not have made a trip to the florist?

This trend is in its infancy. Drive through any neighborhood and see how many (or how few) homes are displaying "Southern Living Gardens". Six assorted, nondescript, round "bushes" are slammed against the foundation of a typical house landscape with two trees evenly spaced on opposite sides of the walk leading to the front door. It is not that most people do not want a pleasing landscape. But it takes a great deal of knowledge and artistic skill or a professional landscape designer with these skills to create these special garden scenes. This can be seen as a great opportunity for the continued growth of our industry.

Organic Gardening Magazine conducted a survey in 1991 which identified four marketing segments of our gardening public. They were labeled as dabblers, decorators, cultivators, and masters. There were many interesting facts uncovered in this survey but one fact that can change our outlook on how we market plants is that the groups that we most often target for our sales represent only 21% of total industry sales. These groups are the masters and the cultivators. They represent the hard-core gardeners. They are the Latin spouting, gardening enthusiasts that others come to for advice on producing show roses (*Rosa* hybrids) or basketball-sized tomatoes. The other two groups are made up of weekend hobbyists and those gardeners whose goals are to just enhance the beauty of their homes. These are not our most knowledgeable or enthusiastic gardeners. However, this group makes up 79% of gardening sales. The mass-market retailers are probably targeting and reaching this group as well as others that have never thought about gardening.

We are part of an aging population that is growing very slowly. We are becoming increasingly more affluent with more demands on our time. Our focus is on the family, health, environment, and spending more time at home. These trends point toward great opportunities for our industry and probably are part of the reasons we are enjoying more commercial prosperity over the past few years.

MARKETING IDEAS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TRENDS

Define Common Problems Among Gardeners. As a small grower, how can you take even greater advantage of these trends and opportunities? You can start by targeting the population of gardeners that are spending 79% of the money. Take a look at all the things a gardener does. Ask them what tasks take the most time and are the most frustrating chores for them to accomplish. Use your horticultural skills and creative talents to produce products that are less time consuming for the gardener to install and maintain and help them produce the "Southern Living Garden" without all the knowledge required to attain this look. Also, explore ways to offer them a finished product so that they do not have to wait 3 to 5 years to realize their vision. Take advantage of their increasing affluence along with their lack of knowledge and time. Again, the florist industry is ahead of our segment of the industry in tapping this market. As soon as flowers come off the auction floor, designers are waiting to take the raw products and create a finished floral arrangement or container garden for display and sale in your local grocery store or mass market.

Offer Convenience. This thought of providing convenience for our customers is

nothing new. It is pervasive in all the products we buy. The next time you walk through the grocery store, note all the things that have been done in recent years to take the hassle out of your life and save you time. Fruit displays offer colorful, enticing, pre-cut, cleaned fruit that is artistically arranged for serving. You also find packaged salads ready to serve, meats and cheeses cut and layered ready to go on your submarine sandwich and ATM machines at the checkout to help you conveniently pay for these other conveniences. Our own industry has made some slow advances toward offering easier ways to a beautiful garden. We sod much more than we seed. We sell 1- and 3-gal perennials in flower now where we once sold bareroot plants in a plastic bag. We even offer espalier plants now ready to plant against the side of our homes. These products have evolved as customers have demanded the change. **Think of what we could do if we made convenience and problem solving our goals and aggressively marketed our ideas for offering instant modular landscaping for “no wait, no hassle” beautiful gardens.**

Quality. The first thought in producing any of these projects is to begin with quality as your major goal. This is your other competitive option in dealing with large nurseries. Many large nurseries also produce high quality plants but you certainly cannot compete unless you have equal or superior quality products. Working with the Christmas tree industry has helped me develop an outlook which requires that I look carefully at plants that we have for sale. Christmas trees are typically thought of as a forestry crop, but there are few crops that are managed as intensively as Christmas trees. Intensive management of a plant crop is the definition of horticulture. Christmas tree growers, through consumer demands, must now evaluate each tree to be sure it has four good sides, is well shaped, and pest free. We should take this same approach to quality, rather than the forestry approach of evaluating quality by looking at blocks of plants. Look at each plant and decide if you would purchase that plant from the retail garden center or put it in your yard or living room. That is the way your customer evaluates your plants.

The following projects are some of the ideas, in various stages of evaluation, that we are exploring at Auburn University.

Alternative Christmas Trees. Producing alternative Christmas trees in containers has already been a success. Leyland cypress was the most highly rated plant as a container Christmas tree but various hollies were also ranked very high by consumers as a product they would buy if plants were available. These products were decorated and displayed in garden centers, botanical gardens, and the State Fair for consumer evaluation. Other trees that were displayed were *Magnolia grandiflora* ‘Little Gem’ and several other magnolias, Arizona cypress, and *Cedrus deodara* (deodar cedar).

Grafting Opportunities. Use your grafting skills, knowledge of plant material and creative skills to produce new and exciting products for the landscape. Oregon growers are already involved in using the best attributes of various cherry species to engage in “tree building”. They take a good rootstock, *Prunus avium*, and select an attractive trunk, *P. serrula*, and then top it off with a weeping tree form, Yoshino cherry (*P. xyedoensis*) or other attractive cultivars. You are only limited by your imagination! We are grafting English hollies on to *Ilex* ‘Nellie R. Stevens’ understock to see if we can overcome problems of growing English Holly in the South. We have found a new grafting technique (to us) from China that has proven to be very effective

in grafting oaks, pecans, and other trees. We are looking at selecting superior cultivars and evaluating understocks of oaks to solve problems such as chlorosis of pin oaks on high, dry, high pH soils in urban areas. We have found we can graft mature oaks successfully which will allow us to rid the consumer of an aesthetic problem of juvenile leaf retention on some oaks. This also allows us to provide wild life enthusiasts with oak trees that bear nuts the second year rather than the typical 6 to 16 years. It is still too early in the research to evaluate reported graft incompatibility problems. Jeff Sibley, a faculty member at Auburn University, is looking at grafting Chinese pistache (*Pistacia chinensis*) to capture the best qualities of fall color and growth habit. Sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*), fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*), stewartia (*Stewartia*), and many other opportunities await the budding opportunist.

Plants on Standards. European growers and western nurseries have exploited the art of putting various plants on a standard for use in patio and balcony gardens. *Rhododendron*, rose, azalea, *Euonymus*, willows (*Salix*), Japanese maples, and many other plants have been lifted up to eye level to display a plant's ornamental qualities or facilitate and accentuate the display of a weeping growth habit. We are trying several of these plants and exploring ideas for new products. It is fun to think about all the possibilities. The consumer and the grower do not know what they are missing, yet!

Instant Hedges and Ugly Fences. How many times have you heard a gardener request a fast growing screen plant? They want something that will produce an instant 12-ft screen and then stop growing. Having nothing to solve this problem, the consumer buys an 8 ft, \$6 to \$10 per foot ugly fence and installs it at 2 to 3 times this price only to have to cover it up over 3 to 4 years with a pretty vine or shrub. Can we give them an instant hedge at a comparable price? We are looking at production systems to address this problem. Can you take those ugly fence sections and lattice arbors and provide these sections already covered in the pretty vines for modular installation of a fence? This would provide the look of an established landscape in some of the stark, bleak, clear-cut new construction sites.

Parterre Gardens. What about parterre gardens? How often do you get people returning from their travels to Longwood Gardens or the formal French gardens and hear them talk of how nice it would be to have one of those designs in their back yard? Can we grow these finished garden designs and offer them in a glossy pictorial catalogue for designers, landscape architects, and garden centers to provide instant elegance, a touch of Paris and royalty in their back yard. This takes knowledge, expertise, and skill that certainly the typical gardener and most designers do not possess (the problem, the answer, the opportunity, and the niche).

Using Existing Plants in a New Way. There is also the opportunity to take existing plants that are not often purchased and offer new ways in which these plants can be used effectively in the landscape. I was very impressed with the use of redosier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) and yellow twigged dogwood (*C. sericea* 'Flaviramea') as a formal hedge (very effective in winter). Have you seen smoke tree used as a mass planting and cut back each year as a large ground cover? Some of our semidwarf crapemyrtles (*Lagerstroemia*) are being used in this fashion. Travel, reading, and trying to explore different forms of each plant will give you a number of new ideas to try.

Container Gardens. Container gardens are on the rise to offer year-round color and aesthetic appeal to business and home entrances and patios and decks. We provide the containers, media, fertilizer, and plants but no guide for success. Just as florists provide finished arrangements, so should we. Few people have the knowledge of plants, color, texture, size, form, shape, growth rate, and adaptability of combinations of plants to create effective container plantings. All this knowledge required screams NICHE!!!

Window Boxes. Fads and fashions are common in our industry. At one time window boxes were “quite the thing”. They probably phased out because of failures of design and being too time consuming to wait for development of the finished product. Let’s bring them back, instant, new, and improved, and low maintenance, a touch of nostalgia from grandmother’s house. Professionally designed, colorful, effective, seasonally replaceable insert boxes of beautifully arranged flowers, and foliage plants for use in window boxes could be fashionable today. It is no wonder gardening is our number one hobby! It is so much fun to think of the possibilities.

Good-looking Fruit Trees. Have you ever found a good looking fruit tree in a garden center? They are usually the crooked, twisted, cut off stick jammed in the back of the garden center with a picture of an apple or peach dangling from a broken branch. A gardener has to have great imagination and patience to envision fruit on that ugly stick. How do you begin to convert that stick into a well branched, properly pruned fruit tree? Do you have faith that this tree will produce a “Super Ruby-red Scrumptious” apple cultivar or 3 years later will you find a “Grungy Green Reject” apple. Wouldn’t it be nice if some grower would produce an apple tree in a container that was already pruned properly and had that delicious apple dangling from the branches. There is no vision to ponder. Reality is in front of you and a taste away. A nursery in Tennessee is already exploring this niche as well as growing the trees as an espaliered pot-in-pot production crop.

Children’s Gardens. Children’s gardens are a current topic in popular horticulture magazines. It is strange to think that people with children have disposable income but I often wander by \$500,000 homes and see tricycles parked in the garage. They are obviously not in the noble profession of horticulture. Can we use our talents to produce topiaries or kits for topiaries for their education and enjoyment? This is an area that offers great opportunities for creative, children-loving horticulturists. How can you take thoughts of magic carpets, castles, and dinosaurs and use horticulture products to enhance those dreams?

Espalier Plants. We are currently producing these plants on a small scale and in small containers. We could be producing larger scale plants for instant coverage and softening of large stark, blank, glaring walls. We could follow the European nurseries and produce trees growing in a single plane for narrow streets or formal drives. Fruit trees would fit well here too.

Bareroot Plant Production Revived. A final area that we are investigating is the possibility of bringing back bareroot plants as a viable, reliable, and inexpensive way to market trees and other plants. Dr. Dan Struve, at Ohio State University, is conducting research on accelerated growth of trees in small containers in an inert media that can be easily removed from the roots for shipping or transplanting. We

have followed up and cooperated with Dr. Struve in taking the process one step further to produce trees in large containers for bareroot export sales and to reduce costs for shipping and handling of trees for mass plantings of larger trees or for use in urban plantings. We are using a product called Profile made by Aimcor Corporation as the inert medium for producing these trees. This project is in its first year of evaluation. We are also re-exploring the possibility of producing sod, bareroot groundcovers by planting groundcover liners in beds underlined with landscape fabric painted with Spin-out in Profile medium. Hopefully we can produce a product to offer an instant mature landscape appearance by harvesting these plants as a solid sod. We are using a sod netting to help hold the plants together. This is also in the early stages of evaluation.

These are a few of the ideas that we are trying — but these ideas barely scratch the surface of the opportunities that we could develop to expand our horticulture base and our customer's gardening enjoyment. Our industry is so diverse that there are opportunities for everyone, big and small. Use your horticultural skills, artistic talents, and creative ideas to create a niche. As you develop your production ideas, take a tip from big business and develop your marketing strategies at the same time so that when the products are ready for sale there will be waiting, eager customers ready to buy the new products.