

Niche Marketing of Native Plants[©]

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing of native plants by a mail-order nursery necessitates a different approach than a traditional nursery or garden center. Native plants are either “unknown” or thought of as “weeds” to the uninformed gardener. Extensive customer education is needed in order to make the customer aware of the features and benefits of native plants. We must also address the negative image of natives as “weeds” or untidy plants in the landscape.

Being a mail-order nursery does not allow very much one-on-one communication with the customer. This means we must be clean and concise on the message we present. The use of multiple media is necessary to reach the broad audience we are targeting.

Our marketing philosophy is summed up by two slogans which we use: “We-Du Natives” and “If you can find it in a garden center, we probably don’t grow it!”

MARKETS

Home Gardeners. Home gardeners account for about 50% of our total sales. We market to the top 25% of the gardening public as far as knowledgeable gardeners are concerned. A high percentage of these advanced gardeners are veterans in purchasing plants and rely on specialty nurseries to purchase new and uncommon plants. However, some of these veterans are new to the native plant scene. They are challenged to try new and unknown plants and plant families. Many gardeners are purists, gardening with only native plants while others pick and choose according to the specific plant. Although we target the educated gardener, many average gardeners enter the native plant scene as education about the benefits of native plants is brought forward.

Commercial Customers. This group account for about 20% of our total sales.

- Parks, both public and private amusement, are moving more and more to native plants. They can educate the public about natives as well as benefit from some of the low-maintenance species that are available. President Clinton’s proclamation to use native plants in national parks has been a boost to our industry.
- Arboreta represent a large portion of the native plant movement. They are focused on the education and trials of native plants local to their region. They are our ideal customers as they are looking for rare, unusual, and little-used natives.
- Zoos are in the midst of a major “greening” of their parks. It is not uncommon for many zoos to have an equal value of investment in their plants as well as their main attraction animals. Zoos are rapidly becoming a showplace for native plants.
- Aquariums, like zoos are designing with native plants to give a view representative of their local species. Staggering budgets for

native plants are raising the bar for other established aquariums to keep up with.

- Schools, especially elementary schools, are very involved in teaching about nature and native plants. Butterfly gardens have become tremendously popular in teaching how nature works. Also, there is a major resurgence on college campuses to re-landscape their grounds with native gardens in order to compare with other gardens around the world.

Collectors. Collectors now account for about 15% of sales as the most die-hard gardeners are willing to search the world over for the latest and most unusual plants for their collections. This group is highly educated and affluent with a great deal of disposable income.

Nurseries. Nurseries account for 15% of sales as they buy to stock the “Collector’s Corner” in their store or for “that special plant” for their most discriminating customers. Many nurseries purchase that “weird” or unusual plant to propagate and later sell to offer something completely different than their competitors.

MARKETING

Advertising. Advertising expenditures account for less than 1% of gross sales. We focus on unconventional disciplines to get the message out:

- Plant donations are a great way to get exposure as well as promote the plants we want to emphasize. Conference plant sales and fundraisers offer an opportunity to get the message out to an audience of qualified buyers.
- Printed ads focus on regional and national gardeners. We find that classified advertisements in multiple magazines allow us to get greater exposure while still getting the message out.
- Newsletters of plant and environmental groups are an excellent medium to support the group as well as to influence these pre-qualified customers.
- Catalogs go to our customer base as well as many new customers from conferences, plants sales, etc. This is our largest sales tool in which we offer photographs, plant descriptions, and a wide variety of unusual selections.
- Boxes offer a venue to promote a message to reinforce a customer’s plant purchase decisions.

Press Releases. Press releases offer an economical avenue to promote new plants as well as emphasize plants of special interest.

- A garden writer’s package is offered in which we can send plant information as well as plants with which the writers may become familiar. We can focus on plants we want to promote and can plan promotions by regions of the country.
- Landscape architects are excellent promoters of our products and services. They are especially effective for us when doing commercial projects such as parks, schools, etc.

Public Speaking. Public speaking is an opportunity in which to educate and sell the attributes of our native selections. Plant groups, conferences, and other gatherings are hungry to hear about this relatively new plant group.

Open House. An open house on our nursery grounds is one other opportunity to promote our plants. Since our business is open only by appointment, having open house days creates an aura of a special event. Plant hunters scurry about looking for those "one-of-a-kind" plants. Retail sales for short periods allow for a considerable amount of inventory to be moved without the cost of a permanent retail facility.

Plant Sales. Plant sales are excellent sales events. They are also an opportunity to gain valuable research and development information. Price points, size selections, and plant choices are trialed at plant societies and arboretum plant sales.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

A host of opportunities to promote our native plants is possible through public relations.

- Garden writers are always looking for plant information, interesting stories, and gardening happenings.
- Authors of books are long-term resources to offer basic plant availability.
- Master Gardeners are eager to learn about plants and garden activities. They are considered unbiased and very knowledgeable for the general gardening public.
- Extension service is always willing to publish plant meetings and sales as well as disseminate information on local native plants and plant communities.
- Other mailorder nurseries often recommend WE-DU Nurseries for that plant that no one else has.
- Tours such as garden and nursery as well as others create an avenue to promote and give an education of the native flora. These tours draw customers that show a high interest in our type of product.

INTERNET

The Internet is in a fast growth area for doing business. It offers opportunities to link with other sites of interest to further educate the consumer on native plants. Our catalog is on-line and now offers additional photographs not shown in our printed catalog. Orders placed from old as well as new customers across the net continue to increase at a rapid pace.

MISCELLANEOUS

Other areas in which we interact to promote our native plants are the **research institutions** such as Mt. Cuba and others. Their interest in natives has grown and together we can make selections to introduce into the market.

Libraries remain on our mailing list as they provide an excellent resource to people looking for information on specific plants, especially natives.

State plant promotions target more natives each year. We scan the list of each state so that we may be listed as a resource for that particular plant.

CLOSING REMARKS

In closing, we continue to market natives based on the customer needs and buying habits. We focus on selling the features and benefits of natives:

Features	Benefits
Low-maintenance plants	More leisure time
Drought tolerant	Less water usage
Pest resistant	Less poisons applied
Wildlife attractants	Wildlife for me to enjoy
Beautiful	Enjoyment and satisfaction

We feel that the native plant market is new to consumers and will be a major growth segment such as perennials were a few years ago. The environmental movement will lead many to try some natives in their gardens as they feel that they are helping do their part, even though small, in sustaining the natural environment.