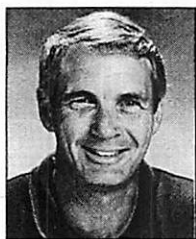


WHO'S BUYING THESE PLANTS, ANYWAY?

By Allan Armitage, *The University of Georgia*



I have read numerous studies about marketing and merchandizing and have taken notes in retail seminars and promotional discussions. I am interested in who is buying plants, why they buy (or don't buy) them, how they learn about our products and how much money they spend.

One of the finest reports ever written and one I constantly quote was a small brochure, To Buy or Not To Buy, written Dr Ernest Dichter

of the Institute for Motivational Research. The booklet, which was sponsored by the Geo. J. Ball Co, Pan-American Seed Co and Jiffy-Pot Co. was a classic and made for terrific reading. It was published in 1968 and was the first time where the importance of gardening was stated; ie, gardening was a more important leisure activity than TV, movies or reading books. It was the first time when the words creativity, excitement and therapeutic were used to describe gardening. This same study also showed that when we talked about tag alongs (labels), most consumers (65%) thought we were discussing trailers..

A recent survey in the Gardening section of the flagship newspaper in Atlanta, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution caught my eye. It was put together by Mr. Danny Flanders, one of the fine writers for that paper, and he kindly shared it with me. I want to do the same with you.

Danny 's survey was answered by 2,630 gardeners, and his questions ranged from what kind of gardener you consider yourself to be?, to the amount of money spent on plants and chemicals? More mundane questions, such as where do you get your gardening information? to one which asked "if you were given a gift valued at \$100.00, what would you like it to be?"

In trying to figure out who filled out the survey, various questions were asked about level of gardening, type of garden (eg vegetable, lawn, flowers), confidence as a gardener and age and gender.

The question concerning gardening experience revealed that this survey was answered by gardeners, not yardeners. Over 70% considered themselves gardeners, the rest fell into "mowers", "fair weather gardeners", "houseplant people" and igloo dwellers (those who use the yard to get to the car). Having established a reasonable degree of interest in this group, what else are they telling us? The type of gardens turned out to be a mixture of annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees (95%), although there were a good number who also raised vegetables, and everyone had turf. So the survey established that the respondents had been gardening for a while and gardened with all types of plant materials.

I thought the answers to the question about success as a gardener gave hope to all of us in the industry. Over 90% enjoyed more successes than failures in the garden, nearly 30% "had luck with almost everything they planted". Of course there were 5% who

had more failure than success, while 1%, like my Mother, "don't know why they waste their time and money".

Who are these people? The survey verified what we know, but what us old stuck-in-the-greenhouse males still have trouble believing. Seventy six percent of gardeners are women! 24% are men. The age of gardeners is also not surprising; fewer than 3% are less than 30 years old. In fact, nearly 70% are above 50 years old. Certainly one of the challenges of our industry is to attract more young people to gardening. Of course, if my kids are any indication, people below 30 are less likely to fill out a survey of any kind.

How much time do people spend in the garden was enlightening: There are always a few who spend forever in the garden, but 45% of the respondents spend between 1 and 10 hours a week. Thirty percent spend between 10 and 20 hours, while 15% spend 20-30 hours a week in the garden. I thought about how anyone could find that much time, but let us not forget that gardens are not only for working in. This time may include weeding, planting, mowing, etc, but it also includes playing, cooking out or simply walking around and thinking about nothing while the birds sing. We do that a lot in Georgia.

I thought the question about what is most rewarding about gardening got to the core of this hobby. I have long maintained that we need to make gardening fun, it is not brain surgery. So why do people garden? Twenty eight percent grew food. Incredibly, 50% considered gardening exercise. However, the most common response (95%) was that gardening provided relaxation/therapy! Not much has changed since Dr. Dichter's results of 30 years ago. We are simply feeding a habit, not much different that cigarette peddlers, booze dispensers or drug dealers. This habit however makes the world a much better place. However, why is it that the first thing I smell when I enter most garden centers is the stench of insecticides and fertilizers. Now that is not what I call therapeutic!

Where plants are bought was not too surprising. With a garden-savvy group like this, I would have thought that mail order would have been significant, but only about 6% used mail order as a major source. About 50% used independent garden centers, and approximately 25% used chain stores as their major purchase location. Without doubt, people visit and buy in both independent and chain stores.

Do people really buy plants on impulse? I would have thought that impulse would not be as significant a factor with this group, however, 95% of the respondents said they buy on impulse some of the time! Over 40% said they bought on impulse often! I guess that answers the question why having flowers on the plant are important, and why point of purchase materials continue to color the retail stores.

Favorite plants: The question asked what plant would they recommend for beginning gardeners, and the number one annual (43%)

is impatiens. No surprise here. Number two was marigolds (14%), followed by vinca and zinnias. The most recommended perennial (38%) was the old favorite hosta. However, growers, pay attention; the next most popular perennial was Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia*) with a whopping 22%, followed by daisies/coneflowers (21%). How many are forcing butterfly bush in the greenhouse?

Other interesting answers: Many other questions were asked in the survey, including questions about composting, favorite garden topics and use of chemicals. But a few other odds and ends also interested me, such as where people get their information. Not from me. That is for sure; only 3% considered seminars and courses a major source of information/inspiration. Books, magazines, etc are the most important, followed by advice "across the fence" from other gardeners. Only 13% considered plant tags an important source of information. Could it be that they can't squint enough to read them?

The money aspect of the survey is of great interest to all of us, that is, how much money is being spent on plant materials, and how much on support materials, such as fertilizers and pesticides. When asked about buying seeds and plants in the spring, twenty five percent of the respondents are spending \$100.00 or less, 39% between \$100.00 and \$200.00, 25% spending between \$200.00 and \$500.00 and 8% (our kind of folks) over \$500.00. However, significant dollars are also being spent on the support materials. Forty percent are spending \$100.00 or less, 36% between \$100.00 and \$200.00, 18% are spending between \$200.00 and \$500.00 and 5% toss over \$500.00 of supplies at our plants. I think the plants are still winning, but not by much.

So what has this little, non-scientific survey told us? For me, at least, it has reaffirmed my belief that gardening is mainly a form of therapy and relaxation, and that women are the engines and that men provide little but exhaust.

- It has told me that people listen to other gardeners about gardening, that we better keep putting out good plants so the talk "over the fence" will remain positive, and that my seminars are useless.

- It shows that people believe they are successful in gardening, and this is something we must foster, the perception that something that is fun and good for use is also easy.

- It tells me that money is being spent on plants, although probably not enough, but the ratio of chemicals to plants is too high.

Oh, and by the way, that \$100.00 gift certificate..... When anything could be bought, from a night out on the town to using it at your favorite store, about 25% of the respondents answered, a pile of composted cow manure. Gardeners, your ultimate clientele, are strange ducks, get out and enjoy them.

Many thanks to Danny Flanders and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution for sharing the survey with me.

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