

GIVE THE GARDEN WRITERS WHAT THEY WANT

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This is the second in a series of articles on Garden Writers and the marketing of greenhouse crops. Garden writers are an important group in the lawn and garden industry and influence demand at the retail level. A communications program with Garden Writers should be considered by growers of greenhouse crops, especially if you market to the retail trade. Growers and retailers should also

consider becoming Garden Writers for their local paper, radio, or television station.

To assist growers in development of a marketing plan, Garden Writers were asked to assess the value of several potential services and types of information for their gardening communications. These findings could help groups that supply services and information to set priorities and focus on high value activities. The four most valued services, based on percent response for "very valuable" were, new plant releases (44%), current pest problems (43%), list of local suppliers of new plants (37%), and grower tours and open-house (33%). It appears that garden writers place a high value on staying current on the release of new plants since the first and third rated services were related to identification of new plant varieties and suppliers of these new varieties in their locale. This may be related to the fact that new plant information was the third highest rated type of plant material information that generated positive consumer response.

Two other highly rated services that over 30% of the respondents rated as "very valuable" were photography, slides, and camera-ready artwork (35%), and monthly IPM tips for pest control (31%). The Garden Writers appear to place a high value on information related to pest identification and IPM methods of pest control as these two areas were rated second in value and fifth in plant information out of the twelve options provided. The information on pest control would need to be specific for a particular geographic area.

For five service options, 49-60% of the Garden Writers placed little or no value. These included monthly vegetable gardening tips (49%), availability of growers/university personnel for interviews (50%), monthly suggestions for landscape maintenance (51%), regular fax describing new plants (54%), and internet web sites (60%). The apparent lack of interest in grower web sites could be due to the current low level of availability of web pages and/or the relative lack of use of such medium by Garden Writers. However, this technology is relatively new and may increase in usage in the near future. Garden Writers place a relatively low value on routine monthly maintenance tips (16%, very valuable) but a high relative value (31%, very valuable) on monthly IPM tips. This could be due to higher public interest in IPM pest control, lack of knowledge of IPM practices by Garden Writers, and a higher level of familiarity of Garden Writers with routine landscape maintenance. The low rating (11th of 12 categories) for a monthly fax describing new plant material, but the high rating for new plant

releases (1st of 12 categories) suggests that Garden Writers want more than a listing of new plant varieties. They also need detailed cultural information, a list of suppliers and photography or artwork to excite the consumer.

Development of an educational or marketing communications program directed to Garden Writers would benefit from a basic understanding of: (a) their current level of communications with different groups, (b) their view of current gardening practices and plant material, and (c) how Garden Writers are exposed to new plant varieties. Less than half of the Garden Writers (45%) currently receive all of the plant material information needed. There appears to be a substantial opportunity for various expert groups to supply additional information. It appears from this survey that growers are more active in communicating with Garden Writers than are university personnel. Approximately 64% of garden writers receive regular correspondence from growers compared to 50% that receive regular correspondence from land grant institutions. Both groups have considerable information of benefit to Garden Writers and should increase their outreach efforts. About 30% of Garden Writers are using the world wide web to distribute their information, which is impressive for this new technology. A rather high percentage of respondents (70%) indicated they coordinate release of information on new plant varieties with plant availability. Growers and other suppliers that are not communicating with Garden Writers may be able to better plan production and release of new items if a two-way communication is established.

A substantial number of respondents (58%) have at least some college level training in horticulture. A positive response to this question could imply a few courses to a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree. The question did not address college level training in other disciplines such as journalism.

Garden Writers were queried regarding their views on gardening practices and plant material. Approximately 42% of respondents indicated that they prefer strictly organic gardening to other methods. This suggests a substantial interest in organic gardening but that as a population, garden writers have a fairly balanced view toward strict organic gardening and traditional gardening techniques. Other clues about Garden Writers views of plant material were:

- (a) approximately one-half (46%) of the Garden Writers feel that herbaceous perennials are low maintenance plants,
- (b) approximately one-third (29%) believe that native plants are preferable to introduced cultivars, and
- (c) approximately three-fourths (77%) feel that sod/turf is a high maintenance plant.

The results suggest that Garden Writers are a discerning group as related to generalizations in the gardening field. For instance, a little over one-half of the writers did not feel that herbaceous perennials were low maintenance plants. Certain segments of the landscape trade associate herbaceous perennials with low maintenance plants whereas at least half of the garden writers have

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experiences that suggest otherwise. There appears to be relatively little acceptance of the generalization that the gardener is assured of better performance with native species. Perhaps the Garden Writer experience in their home gardens has demonstrated good performance with introduced species. On the controversial topic of the relative maintenance requirements of turf grass, Garden Writers as a group lean toward the view that turf is a high maintenance item (77%).

Garden Writers make extensive use of garden shows and home gardens to gather information on plant material. A high percentage of Garden Writers attend retail flower or home and garden shows (90%) to obtain information on plant material and to a lesser extent attend trade shows sponsored by plant producers (66%). Perhaps plant producers could increase Garden Writer attendance by targeted advertising and tailored educational sessions. Essentially all Garden Writers (97%) maintain a garden at home and most (88%) test new plant varieties in their home garden. This suggests that the home gardening experience would be influential in the gardening communications of Garden Writers. Plant samples supplied to Garden Writers and grown in their home garden would be influential in their communications.

(Floral Merchandisingcontinued from page 35)

Idea 8: *Keep undecorated plants available to attract consumers who are buying for themselves.*

If an item is too gift-oriented, customers may be reluctant to buy it for themselves or may overlook it for home use. Giving them the choice of buying something less dressy can stimulate people who don't normally buy flowers and plants for themselves. Undecorated plants are also popular with people who like to create their own designs or prefer to use a favorite container at home. Keeping a variety of picks, ribbons, and ceramic novelty flower pots on hand creates further impulse sales.

Idea 9: *Change stock and displays often so consumers are drawn back for repeat, but impulse sales.*

Changing the look and feel of a display is crucial to capturing the impulse buy, especially when much of the inventory remains the same. Repositioning displays and highlighting different items gives a fresh appearance that encourages the impulse purchase. Variety is important. Encourage multiple plant purchases with a bulk price offering when plant inventories seem to stagnate on the shelf.

Idea 10: *Situate the floral department so that everyone knows where it is and where it can be seen.*

Just because floriculture is laden with color and scents doesn't give a retailer license to play hide-and-seek with the floral department. If the physical layout of the building does not warrant having the floral displays in a highly visible location, provide signage and other directions to make customers aware of what and where the floriculture is. Remember, most floral sales are impulse sales, and if the flowers can't be seen, they can't be bought.

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