



Retailing Starts with Benches and Carts

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As growers, we want to produce the best product possible. As sellers, we have to keep in mind that "marketing is everything". People may love our plants, but they don't actually need them. This means that we are competing for every dollar of disposable income with every other business that can supply consumers with products they want.

What is our edge as plant growers? It seems that most Americans feel stressed by the pressures of everyday life, and we are all looking for ways to relieve stress. According to a recent survey, 95% of gardeners view gardening as therapeutic. Great! Now for the big question: How do you attract some of those gardeners?

For the past two decades, growers and retailers alike have been inundated with the phrase 'marketing mix'. One important piece of this mix is promotion. In-store promotion begins with displays, and displays begin with benches.

The primary goal of any bench is to raise plants above the level of the ground. For many growers, the first display benches consist of wooden pallets. There is nothing wrong with this approach, but a better idea would be to raise the pallets up to the level of the customer by placing the pallets on cinder blocks.

As the business grows, wood and wire benches may replace pallets. Metal benches may be the last stage in this process. Plastic and fiberglass are becoming more popular as bench materials because they are portable, easy to maintain, and collapsible.

Often, plants are sold off the same bench on which they are grown. In a typical greenhouse setting, this means long aisles, drip irrigation lines, tight spacing,

and a lack of signage. In some situations, using growing benches for retail sales does not present a problem. However, growing and selling are two very different things. Benches and greenhouse space are designed for production and focus on minimizing "wasted" space. In a retail setting, we need to have ample room for traffic flow. For instance, aisles should be wide enough for carts to pass through.

The production greenhouse can be converted very quickly to a retail area by removing benches and adding rolling display carts. As soon as the retail season starts, benches at the head of the greenhouse should be removed to allow open space for items that show the variety of products for sale. Opening up the first ten feet of the greenhouse allows customers a panoramic view of the plants as soon as they walk in. Think of entering a grocery store: islands of fruit or bread or flowers greet you, not row upon row of canned goods. You want to create the feeling of an open market. Use the first ten feet of the greenhouse as a foyer to show an assortment of the goods you



James L. Gibson



Brian E. Whipker

The ideal display bench is well signed, tiered, full of texture, and appeals to the eye.



Brian E. Whipker

Sales islands create a market-like atmosphere while providing easy maneuverability of customers' shopping carts.



James L. Gilson

Always be ready with a large supply of retail carts.

have to offer, rather than bombarding shoppers the instant they enter the sales area. Customers do not want to feel claustrophobic when they first enter a greenhouse or retail area. Shoppers who feel crowded will cut their buying time short.

Benches should do more than keep plants high and dry. Well-designed benches and displays are key to more sales, and highlighted products should be prominently displayed on end-caps (the display area at the end of an aisle). More merchandise is sold off of end-caps than any other display space. It is a good idea to break up shelves and benches that are too long to create more end-caps, thus increasing opportunities for impulse buying. If aisles are too short, however, shoppers tend to stand at the end of the aisle and look down it, rather than push their carts through, and this cuts down on impulse purchasing.

Attractiveness influences unplanned purchases because most customers have not decided on everything they will buy when they enter a retail establishment. It is estimated that at least half of the purchases made in a supermarket are impulse buys. The more information presented along with the product, the greater the likelihood of purchase.

Examples of impulse items in the garden center are "instant gardens", such as color bowls, window boxes, and hanging baskets. Rather than a sea of hanging baskets in the greenhouse, show individual baskets, or small groups of baskets, to mark them as special. Displaying baskets at eye level also solves the problem of how the customer will obtain the basket. Hundreds of dollars in impulse sales are lost because customers are unable to reach hanging baskets, and employees are not always available to assist them. Of course, it is not always feasible to place baskets on benches, but an easily accessible display would alleviate many problems. One such display is a 4-by-4 post with whorls of hooks, prominently displayed in a strong sales area.

The strong selling areas within a store are outer aisles, the beginning and ending of each aisle, the check-out area, the right side of the aisle, and

any shelf or display at eye level. Weak selling areas include the left side of the aisle, floor shelves, inner aisles, and 'dead' areas in the center of the store.

Special displays are more effective than expanded shelf space. A display bench or cart can be used as a garden in itself. Some of the most effective display units are tiered. The best display we have seen was a tiered structure that presented the plants en masse. It made us want to buy everything in sight. We were not concerned with the display because we couldn't even see it. The retailer who set up that display had chosen the perfect structure.

Display structures must be designed with shopping in mind. Customers cannot easily shop displays if they are required to reach further than three feet. Another rule of thumb is to place products where they can be easily removed from the display, without disturbing adjacent plants.

One of the greatest failings of mass merchandisers is that they sell product directly from shipping carts. Carts designed for shipping are not designed for shopping. Nor are they designed for efficient watering or light penetration. While most grower-retailers are not guilty of this phenomenon, we may be guilty of equally poor choices for benches.

Carts

Supermarkets were the first to discover the importance of wheeled carts that would hold products (and children). The inventor of the modern grocery cart, Sylvan Goldman, discovered in the 1930s that people would buy only as many products as they could comfortably carry. Giving them a wheeled cart increased the amount of time they spent in the store and the number of products bought.

The big box stores also know this to be true. Imagine walking into a mass merchandiser and finding that all the carts are taken. You have several choices: you can hunt down a cart, wait for one to become available, or decide to buy fewer items. Most likely, however, you would go elsewhere to shop.

Why should a small retailer be any different from grocers and big box stores? By not providing good carts, we limit the amount and kind of products sold. Large carts encourage consumers to purchase high profit items such as potting mix and mulch. Small carts can limit purchases to small items. Carts should

be able to hold a flat with ease, without fear of the cart tipping or of the flat sliding off. Just as with grocery carts, providing a seat for children allows parents to shop for a longer period of time and with greater convenience.

Pull-behind wagons are often used in retail centers. While they are stable and relatively inexpensive, customers are more accustomed to pushing carts in front of them, rather than pulling wagons behind them. If pull-behind wagons are used, the handles should be long enough to prevent back strain. After all, who wants to hand out chiropractor recommendations along with planting instructions?

Push-type carts also allow customers to see what they are buying, to mix and match colors easily, and to see what they don't have. Other physical features are important in a cart: extended handles that stay upright are preferred, as are wheels that are large, durable, and pneumatic. Two tiers allow more space for goods. Carts that are only slightly lower than display benches allow our primary customers (women over the age of 45) to load items more easily.

The best type of cart to use may depend on the garden center itself. Paved areas allow carts to roll smoothly. If paved walkways are not available, use carts with larger wheels. Stackable carts are huge space-savers.

Summary

Benches and carts are not something we typically focus on, perhaps because we don't hear complaints from customers about these kinds of things, or maybe because we are more concerned with producing a quality product. This approach may be costing us more than we know. Put yourself in the customer's shoes and shop your own store. How was it? Were you able to maneuver successfully between the aisles? What caught your attention and why? Did an end-cap display make you want to buy the item? Perhaps the most important question to ask yourself is at what point did you get tired of being in the store and began craving a new experience? That's the same amount of time your customer will spend shopping.

Web connection. Supporting this article is a website (<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/floriculture/RR/index.html>) that will provide more detailed information about benches and carts, along with several links to suppliers.