

What's Hot in Retail Plants?

A panel of garden center customers offered valuable insights during the 2010 *Big Grower* Executive Summit.



By Kip Creel

StandPoint, an Atlanta-based market research firm conducted a consumer panel during February 2010 in Tampa, Fla., to obtain insights on the buying patterns of consumers making retail plant purchases.

Consumer Picks

We recruited 12 consumers from the Tampa area to participate in this research project. Demographically, the panelists were quite diverse, with a range of age, income and gardening expertise. Each participant visited a local Home Depot and a Lowe's to purchase plants and then had a one-on-one interview with moderator Kip Creel. Finally, a subset of the participants participated in a panel discussion at the 2010 *Big Grower* Executive Summit.

The details of the research gained from the consumer panel was enlightening, with several key findings on preferences in merchandising, buyer behavior, brand awareness and what's hot right now.

Buyer Behavior: Where and How Often

In general, the panelists purchased plants two to three times per year. About half had purchased from a locally owned garden center but the most frequented channel was indeed the big box store.

When asked why they did not purchase plants more often, the predictable answer was "time." American consumers tend to have larger lots and spend a lot of time on cutting grass and maintenance. As a result, money and time spent on flowers decreases, in comparison to European counterparts.

As mentioned before, few consumers knew the type of plant they wanted upon entering the store. However they did have a clear understanding of the plant's intended function in the landscape: for a container, for a flower bed, along a walkway, around a mailbox, as a privacy screen, et cetera. The color and the texture of the plant often "sealed the deal," while a lack of information or instructions was a common deal breaker. In many instances, panelists didn't choose a plant if it lacked clear instructions, even if it met all other criteria.

Importance of Outdoor Displays

Products displayed outside the garden center are a powerful draw. Consumers expect and prefer the garden center to be "full" and "compact," with lots of variety. The consumer panelists commented on the effectiveness of outdoor displays at Lowe's that established a powerful first impression for the garden center. It is encouraging that consumers were not overwhelmed by this variety of offerings, and actually enjoyed the "sense of discovery" and ability to comparison shop. Few knew exactly what they wanted to purchase beforehand and made their selections right in the garden center.

This selection behavior differs from other product categories such as packaged foods where the "paradox of choice" can mean that consumers will delay a purchase because they are overwhelmed with the options. Since



Twelve consumers took to Tampa-area big box retailers to evaluate their shopping experiences.

