

# Catering To Upscale Garden Centers

Big boxes aren't the only retailers out there. Read how some of your fellow growers are working to impress the independent garden center channel.

By Catherine Evans



*Working with independent garden centers is one way to showcase some new and interesting items the big boxes won't carry.*

Many times, the discussion at trade shows, in industry publications or among industry members is about the things big box growers are doing to please their customers. What you hear about less often is what some of the other growers are doing — the ones that grow specifically for independent garden centers. Even though each group is producing plants, there are many differences between the two.

Going the independent route works well, but you have to be out there constantly working the garden centers, building relationships, and offering good and different materials. Growers who work with independent retailers need to maintain those relationships and help more garden centers keep their benches full and moving.

When talking to growers who focus on independent garden centers, the same topics come up: working with interesting retailers, having unique plants/programs and great customer service. It's appreciating these factors that sets growers for independents apart. Ed Overdeest, president of Overdeest Nurseries, Bridgeton, N.J., summarized the feeling best: "Why not the big boxes? We've always dealt with the independent garden centers. We're comfortable with that relationship, and we see that as our best future."

## The Chosen Ones

For most growers, working with an independent garden center is a conscious decision. "We're looking for progressive, marketing-oriented garden centers that are tuned into the emerging trends in the industry," explained Overdeest. Right now, garden centers are the ones who fit that bill; they are going crazy to keep up with trends and develop their niche.

"We have flexibility to work with the garden centers," added Doug Cole, president of D.S. Cole Growers, Loudon, N.H. "Basically, we share the same philosophy in products — ones that hit our growing style or our product style or vice versa. We try to look for the upscale niches of the garden centers; [centers] that maybe are going out on a limb."

Both of these growers still offer the everyday products that sell best in spring, but they have added more to



**Left:** This line of succulents from D.S. Cole Growers is shipped in specially designed clay pots that were designed for use as a pot cover. **Right:** The Grandiflora brand focuses on a variety of landscaping plants — from annuals and herbs in 4-inch pots to shrubs, perennials, groundcovers and topiaries. (Photo: Grandiflora)

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their selection to attract niche stores. In fact, within the last few years, Cole developed a rule of thumb for his 12-inch combos: Every container has to have either a tropical plant or a woody shrub in it to make it more interesting and upscale looking, which is completely different than what most growers are doing.

Alan Shapiro, owner/president of Grandiflora, Gainesville, Fla., made the same discovery after running his own garden center for a number of years. "We attracted a lot of people that collected unusual plants," said Shapiro. "In other words, if they liked ginger lilies, they would try to get every kind of ginger available. So, I knew there was a market for selling the oddball plants and we started growing them ourselves. We also discovered that other retailers wanted to carry them, too."

Shapiro eventually decided to make uniqueness the focal point of his business and became a wholesale grower for independents and sophisticated landscapers. "What we saw a decade ago was a lot of retailers going by the wayside because they were the old mom-and-pop stores that really didn't have a good sense of how to market their products or make themselves unique," he said.

"Garden centers either dropped by the wayside or were forced to learn more about how to modernize, how to market, how to win customers and how to steal business away from the mass merchants."

### Uniqueness Counts

You can't target unique, niche garden centers without growing unique products and having good marketing programs. Overdevest, Cole and Shapiro have done just that; their programs typify how growers can attract independent garden center customers.

**Overdevest Nurseries.** Overdevest offers the Garden Splendor program, which allows retailers to have a brand that is not at the box stores or other garden centers in the area. "The main philosophy of Garden Splendor is that it is the garden center's brand," said Overdevest. "Much of our marketing and promotion incorporates the garden center's name along with our brand name. It's what we call our 'byline' process or technique."

Each plant is labeled with a typical plastic tag, which includes a photo and culture information and hangs on a stake. Also included is the Remember Me metal tag with the species, variety name and Garden Splendor logo. The Remember Me tags can be placed in the consumers' gardens to help them identify the plants they bought.

Overdevest does a lot with POP, signage and online marketing, including an extensive Web site ([www.gardensplendor.com](http://www.gardensplendor.com)) that offers featured plants, clips of a local radio gardening show and information on Garden Splendor.

**Grandiflora.** "Just a few years ago, we registered the fictitious name Grandiflora and the trademark name: Grandiflora Grown," Shapiro said. "We're attempting to brand our flowing plant line. We carry shrubs, trees, groundcovers, but specifically, we would like people to think Grandiflora Grown when they pick out their echinaceas, salvias, lantanas, or other long-blooming herbaceous plants."

Grandiflora carries the types of outdoor landscaping plants needed to garden in Zones 7-10 — from annuals and herbs in 4-inch pots to shrubs, perennials, groundcovers, flowering vines and topiaries. Grandiflora has plant tags and logo wear that is incorporated into its plant materials.

An extensive Web site, [www.grandifloragrown.com](http://www.grandifloragrown.com), also has plant information that can help the retailers sell more.

**D.S. Cole Growers.** D.S. Cole Growers has many unique programs. One of the programs, called Ponga Pot, features ferns growing in hollowed-out New Zealand tree fern logs. "We also have a line of succu-



**Right:** Garden Splendor from Overdevest Nurseries is often used as the garden center's brand because marketing and promotion incorporates the garden center's name in addition to the brand name. **Left:** D.S. Cole Growers' Ponga Pots consist of New Zealand tree fern logs cut from sustainable forests and hollowed-out to hold interesting plants.

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lents that all go out in a specially designed clay pot that's washed in a creamy white color that we use as a pot cover," Cole said.

Cole also does some interesting things with blueberry trees. "I also found a good technique of growing low-bush blueberries like the Wild Maine kind. They're like a carpet," explained Cole. "We experimented last year, and we've got low-bush blueberries in a blue pot. I made a proprietary sign that is a cluster of blueberries sitting up on a stick. It is about 3 or 4 inches in diameter and says Wild Maine Blueberries. This is the first year we're going to have it overwintered and really full pots ready for sale." You can get information on these programs at [www.dscolegrowers.com](http://www.dscolegrowers.com).

#### Customers Come First

One of the interesting things about working with a number of customers is that you need to have really good customer service. All the growers GPN spoke with have worked for many years to create great customer service plans.

"The people we have in sales are all people who have intimate knowledge of the plants," said Shapiro. "They're excited when we get a new plant. They want to take it home for their own yards and try it. They're not just automatons taking orders — their enthusiasm for plants comes across in their selling."

This enthusiasm can be seen in many areas at Grandiflora. From the plants offered in multiple sizes to suit individual customers to the time spent answering customer questions, the staff understands that the business relies on good customer service.

Overdevest has a very similar philosophy. The company worked with retailers to create a personalized part of the Garden Splendor Web site where gardeners can go for centers that offer the plants they want. The site has photos, information about the plants and more, which makes it a good tool for retailers and consumers to use.

Cole offers another aspect of customer service: He often travels to other countries to bring back new ideas that would not normally be found in the United States. "I've been to Europe, and I've seen how it look more decorated and upscale, and all you have to do is basically put a pot in another pot," said Cole. "Personally, as a consumer, I love the idea." He uses that information to help his customers stay on top of the trends, and consumers seem to love the new, interesting materials.

What these garden centers are doing is just a small part of the overall picture of how growers and independent garden centers work together. There are many ways the small to mid-sized growers can work with independent garden

centers. It is all learning by example, and these are some pretty good examples to follow. **GPN**

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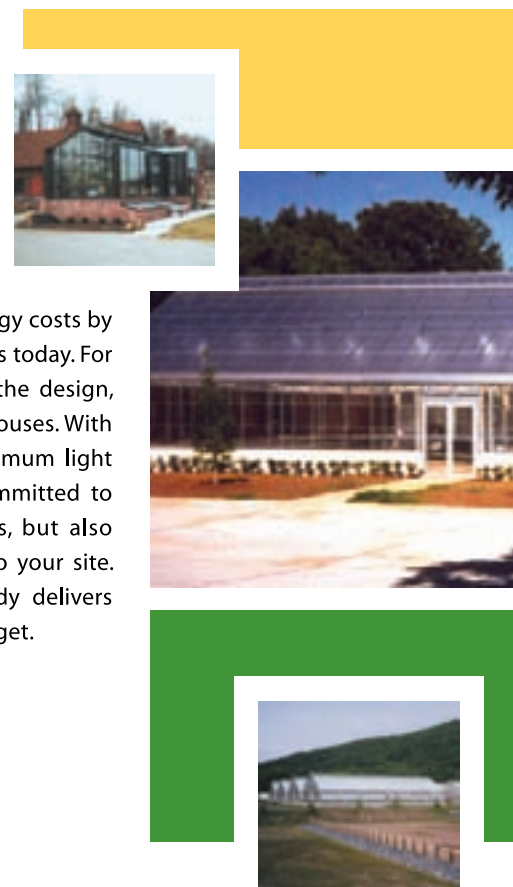
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