

# Giving Displays a Second Look

Grower/retailers already have a lot on their plates. Knowing your display-fixture options before you dive into the investment could save you a headache.

By Evan Sharples

Display fixtures are often seen as a necessary evil in the industry. As a result, the proper time and effort may not be put forth in investing on a product that could potentially tip the scale in your favor versus a competitor. Customers love to shop in general and, when they enter a garden center, are already eager candidates to spend money. Perception is reality from a customer's standpoint, and it is their perception of the retail environment that will play a large role in determining how much money they spend. At the same time, you as a grower incur operational costs that affect the bottom line. Maintaining the proper balance between efficient spending versus effective selling determines your level of success. So, if there were a fixture that might help both boost sales and eliminate some costs, you should probably be interested.

But there are a lot of options available — and grower/retailers have enough to think about without feeling inundated by choices — so here's a quick look at what's available, so you can make the best decision with the information you have.

There are many types of fixtures being used for garden center displays. Of the most commonly seen are block and board, molded plastic and expanded metal. Wood fixtures are also prevalent and a great touch. A newer option is self-watering displays.

#### Block and Board

Block and board is just as it sounds: Concrete cinder block and wood planks or pallets are arranged in various orientations to provide display shelves needed for the various types of plant material being sold. This fixturing typically costs the least but has some drawbacks. For example, the blocks are heavy and you need a lot of them. If you rearrange fixturing periodically, this can take hours and numerous hands. The blocks also are porous, which makes them a perfect hideout for algae and the water it needs.



Nexus Corp.'s self-watering display fixtures are available with overhead irrigation for hanging baskets.



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There is also a lot of surface contact with the floor that traps excess water around the base of the blocks and makes sweeping or power washing beneath the tables difficult. As the boards are continuously subjected to water from irrigation, they will degrade and need to be replaced. Overall, this type of garden center display is relatively easy for the do-it-yourselfer, but it probably won't provide a shopper with the best perception of your retail area.

### Molded Plastic

Benches molded entirely out of plastic are another type of relatively low-cost display. These can be arranged in various ways and are available in many different sizes and shapes. They are fairly easy to assemble, but the major drawback is that they require numerous support legs for strength. Many times, the proper support is not installed and, over time, the tables sag and permanently warp. The many legs for this type of fixture also make cleaning around them difficult. Larger table



Self-watering display fixtures are designed to combine ebb-and-flood with capillary action to keep plant material in good condition.

tops are typically not available due to limitations in manufacturing, so you'll have to purchase more parts to achieve the same square footage of display space rela-

tive to using other types of fixtures.

### Metal Framing

Displays that use a metal frame with an expanded

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metal decking are fairly common and available in different sizes and designs. They usually require some assembly and can be an attractive way to merchandise plant material. The cost for these tables will be higher than the block and board or

molded plastic, but to most, will be more aesthetically appealing and give the garden center a cleaner look. Expanded metal decking can last for many years, but the sharp edges can be a safety issue for customers and employees. If not sup-

ported correctly, the decking also has a tendency to sag under the weight of heavier plant material.

### Wooden Fixtures

Wooden fixtures can be very nice looking and can provide your

customers with a unique shopping experience. They can be left to naturally weather or be stained or painted to your liking. Therein lies a constant maintenance problem, however. The displays will degrade over time and require replacement if not protected, especially in humid Southern climates. Otherwise they will need periodic upkeep in the form of staining or painting to protect them from the elements and constant water from irrigation. This type of fixture usually comes with a high price tag. And with the additional maintenance, it may not be for every grower.

### Self-Watering Fixtures

Another option, now available from Nexus Corp., automatically waters product. Here's how: It begins with a metal frame and uses a water-tight tray and capillary mat system which can be set up to automatically subirrigate the plant material. Its integration of ebb-and-flood and capillary mat technolo-

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*Keeping plant material watered and looking good can be incredibly time consuming for grower/retailer staff members who could be helping customers in the meantime.*

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gies is quite simple: The table is uniformly flooded to a level dependent on the material being displayed on the fixture, and the product can then water itself through capillary action based on its own needs.

This system has a higher initial cost, but it provides something that all the aforementioned displays do not: watering labor savings that can be easily measured in determining a return on investment. Along with this labor savings, the automatic watering feature helps maintain the quality of plant material until it is sold, minimizing potential losses related to underwatering. As an added benefit, the system also can be set up to capture and reuse water not used by the plants in each watering cycle. An automatic overhead irrigation feature for hanging baskets is also available with this fixture system, further reducing labor costs and allowing your employees to spend more time with customers.

### Financial Impact

The financial impact of display

fixtures can be measured in different ways. Most of the types mentioned above typically have an up-front cost that can initially boost sales by improving shopping experience. From there, the displays will depreciate in value. All fixtures will degrade over time by rusting or rotting until they need to be replaced. The self-watering fixtures, however, immediately contribute to labor savings. Plant quality is maintained until the plant is sold, which greatly reduces shrink.

### Bottom Line

You must be able to supply a quality product. You must provide the customer with a neat and clean environment. You also must incur those unfortunate costs associated with these requirements. A display system that virtually eliminates watering labor and simultaneously contributes to product quality may not be a "no-brainer," but it might be worth investigating.

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