



Bridget White, Editorial Director
(847) 391-1004 • bwwhite@sgcmail.com

Delightful Diffienbachia

Late last month, I stopped by my local grower/retailer/florist to pick up some flowers for my desk and a new foliage plant for a dark corner of my apartment. As usual, I ended up with more than I was shopping for and left with three beautiful sunflowers, a 5-inch diffienbachia and two 2-inch saxifraga. It was a great shopping trip, not only because I found great plants but also because I like spending time in greenhouses. Before I got home, though, my shopping trip also ended up being a real educational experience for me about how real people, not avid gardeners, respond to plants.

Allow me to explain. I took my little box of plants home from the office but made four stops on the way. While I visited with friends, ate dinner, etc., I kept my plants with me (I take mass transportation to work so there was no car to leave them in). At each place, at least one person — eyes alight, big smile on their face — commented about my plants. “What great plants!” “What kind of plant is that?” “Where did you get those plants?” They just kept going on and on.

I couldn't help being amused by so many inquiries about a common diffienbachia, which was the plant drawing most of the attention. After all, those of us in floriculture spend our days, our lives, surrounded by beautiful, exciting plants — traveling the country or the world looking for the latest and greatest; this was just a standard foliage plant in my eyes.

I was happy to be able to expose downtown Chicago consumers at two bars, a restaurant and a convenience store to the wonders of our industry, but through it all, I just kept thinking, “Can it really be the case that all these people have never seen a diffienbachia before? Can they really be so excited about one little foliage plant?”

EXPOSURE IS KEY

Let me stop for a minute and assure you that I'm not making any of this up. The story above is not writer's prerogative; I haven't embellished a single word. People were really fascinated by those three foliage plants, and mostly the diffienbachia. How? Why?

Is it the idea of owning a living thing? The lure of the unfamiliar? More support for SAF's flowers-make-people-smile study? Lack of sophistication (after all, I had bought two varieties whose parent lines are older than I am)?

Whatever the reason, it was a great lesson for me. Intellectually, I know that our industry has very little penetration with the American consumer — a quick drive around nine out of 10 neighborhoods will tell you most homeowners are not avid gardeners. Many Americans never think about purchasing a flower to brighten their desk or spending entire weekends installing a new landscape, as is common in most European countries. But being so immersed in the industry, I think we forget the implications of this simple fact.

I walked away from this experience with a whole new attitude about marketing the industry. Maybe it's not about getting garden centers to stock huge numbers of an item or about stocking the most exotic plants or the widest number of species. Maybe it's not even about developing intricate displays to impress consumers with our product or inventing elaborate branding programs.

All of these things are great, and I'm sure there is a certain customer that needs the newest variety or elaborate displays. But what I learned from my little field trip is that more than anything people just need to be exposed to plants.

Bridget C. White

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