



# The Information-Sharer

By Susan Ward



Want to know what the average experienced gardening consumer thinks about your garden center? GNR's newest columnist can let you know. She's typical of many of your customers and invites you into her mind.

Have you ever wondered what consumers think about when they cannot find a salesperson to help them? What about when they see a garden project point-of-purchase display? The consumer can make or break a business, and with stiff competition from the increasing popularity of chain stores, the independent must be able to catch the consumer's eye.

Let me quickly introduce myself. My name is Susan Ward, and I am new to the business. Not new to gardening – I have been doing that for years – but new to GPN. Greenhouse Product News contacted me to write a column every month to discuss my views on the independent garden center. You see, I am an avid gardener who knows the business, not as an experienced consumer analyst, but as an everyday, out-there-buying consumer.

I am an eighth-grade science teacher in a suburb of Chicago. Therefore, in the summer, I have ample time to spend in my own garden and in my local garden center. Because I have been gardening for years, I do not need quite as much sales help when I am shopping at the garden center. I do, however, need ideas and direction. On the other hand,

my neighbor Betty needs all the help she can get. Betty and I represent your two average gardeners, experienced and inexperienced.

## SERVING THE AVERAGE GARDENER(S)

So how is the independent garden center serving such a wide knowledge base? Not many are.

We live in a society where each person wants what he or she wants, and wants it now. Fast food, ATMs and the garden center do not differ all that much. Though gardening is often considered a peaceful, quiet, leisure hobby, the consumer still lives in this society and still wants to get in and out of the store in less time and with the least amount of money spent. If the garden center does not offer that, then the consumer will find a place that does. And, more often than not, the consumer is turning to the chain store.

Besides wanting the best service, I have an added interest in the garden center because my brother owns one. He has a wonderful store, full of quality products and a great selection. However, he too is feeling the chain store crunch. Because he knows about my interest in what the consumer wants, he asked me for some advice.

One of the things I told my brother was to always have plastic labels in each plant. You would be amazed by how many times I've



gone to the store with a purchase in mind and left without purchasing anything. I may be an experienced gardener, but I still seek knowledge about plants that I am going to grow. Granted, I would buy a plant that I was very familiar with despite the absence of the tag, but I would not purchase a plant that I knew little about. I want the best for my plant and my money.

Think about the inexperienced gardener like Betty. Do you think plant tags are important to her? Absolutely. Plant labels are a necessity to her. Without a label, she has no idea what the plant is, how to care for it or even what color the bloom will be. She does not have a vast library of horticultural books, so it is not an option to just look it up. More importantly, she often complains that she can never find store personnel to help her.

I know many storeowners think that consumers do not rely on the label all that much. They think that people simply read the label in the store, plant the plant and toss out the tag, but many people I know keep the label for reference. I asked Betty what she did with the labels after she got the plant home. She said she always inserts the label next to the plant. She wants to be able to refer to it all year long for plant care. I, on the other hand, have a large stack in my shed that I often reference throughout the year. You can count on me bringing some of the labels with me shopping the next season – I definitely do not want to forget what I planted next to the fence this year. Here again is something that my brother can be sure is done in his store. It is a small investment with big rewards.

Garden project point-of-purchase displays are another great tool for the inexperienced as well as the experienced gardener. Though I am an avid gardener, I am always looking for advice on how to create a more beautiful landscape. On the other hand, Betty is just looking for ideas on how to create a landscape, period. Of course, anyone can buy landscaping books or magazines, but they take time to study. In this fast-paced society, consumers want ideas laid out in an easy-to-read fashion. This is why the point-of-purchase display is such a valuable tool in the garden center. Not only is the consumer getting what she wants (ideas in a convenient,

simple layout), but the garden center is getting the consumer to buy the plants in the display, as well as getting them to come back for more ideas.

#### ONE STEP FURTHER

My brother took this idea one step further. He took some of the already existing point-of-purchase displays in his store and amplified them. One day a week, he hired a local landscaper to give mini-seminars to shoppers. These seminars were given in the middle of the store, without a fee, to any consumer who passed by. Each

seminar lasted about 20 minutes and gave valuable information, including fertilizing, landscaping and choosing shade-loving perennials. Each seminar had numerous topics and was open to questions at the end. When the seminars were over, multiple employees were positioned throughout the store to give directions to products and to answer any additional questions. My brother did this as a trial for three weeks, without advertising this special service.

In the first week, sales were up slightly, but by the third week sales were up remarkably. No advertising – only word of mouth. The best thing about the program was that it was molded for each gardener, regardless of experience. Betty and I, for instance, came for all three sessions. We each took something different away from each seminar and never left the store empty-handed. We were so excited about what we had learned that we wanted to implement it immediately. Consumers are thirsting for easy information: information that is concise and to the point.

