Consumer Purchase Patterns with Foliage Plant Container Gardens

Title: The impact of foliage plant container garden sales on identifying consumer needs, trends, and preferences.

Authors: Emily A. Stefanski and Dr. James L. Gibson

Introduction:

New production and marketing trends are emerging in our industry everyday. The container garden is already becoming a staple of what we produce each season, but staying ahead of the market and producing something unique, and with a higher value, means you need to start looking for different plant materials to spice up what you do. One recent trend is the use of tropical plants (bulbs, palms, foliage, annuals and perennials) in containers.

Traditionally, Florida has been a state known for wholesale production of foliage plants. Wholesale plant sales represented over 2.3 billion dollars in 2000, while retail plant sales reached 1.2 billion. Foliage plants represented $393 million dollars of the total $798 million in total sales of floriculture crops. Hodges and Haydu reported an increase in retail sales during 2000, while the wholesale industry experienced a decrease in sales of 245 million dollars. With the increase in homebuilding and urban sprawl, demand for plant goods increases locally. Because foliage plants are the largest nursery crop commodity in Florida, a need to investigate retailing is paramount.

Importance and potential value of the proposed research:

According to the Economic Impacts of the Florida Environmental Horticulture Industry 2000 Report by Hodges and Haydu, 37% of retail sales are attributed to retail salespersons. Labor is the leading expense in any nursery operation, therefore methods that minimize labor costs must be investigated. Direct mail, discounts, radio and television advertising, and the internet contribute to 13% of retail plant sales in Florida. While these strategies are effective, they incur substantial costs to the producer. On-site strategies to increase plant sales, such as in-house displays, display gardens, and point-of-purchase materials, need to be evaluated in Florida. This research will introduce Florida grower-retailers to the alternatives to traditional sales techniques. Marketing foliage plants as components of container gardens will be investigated. For this reason colorful foliage becomes a real selling point, as these plants will be marketable throughout late spring and summer. The overall goal is to increase the visibility of foliage plants to consumers, thereby increasing production of foliage plants in liners and smaller containers. This research meets a highly prioritized objective of NFF: utilization – new ways to utilize foliage plants.

Methods and materials:

The study will investigate the impact of foliage plant container gardens on identifying consumer needs, trends, and preferences. A collection of foliage plant species from Agri-starts, Inc. will be planted in 20-inch containers based on sun/shade exposure and growth habit (trailing, mounding, and upright). When assembling the plants for the foliage plant container gardens

several factors will be considered: growth habit, season of interest, light levels required, temperature sensitivity, and wherever possible, matching vigor so that one plant doesn't outgrow all other material. Three plants each with a vertical growth habit, a mounding habit and a trailing habit will be installed per container.

The foliage plant container gardens will be constructed with the help of Nancy McDonald from N.G.M. Productions, Inc and then sent to two of the largest garden centers in Florida; Tallahassee and Rockledge. The container gardens will be sold a week at a time in the spring, summer and fall. Consumer response will be measured with a post-purchase survey. The post-purchase survey will define the customer's profile (male/female, education, income range, and reason for purchase).

Preliminary experiment:

Conducted: March 31, 2007
Locations: West Florida Research and Education Center Student Club Plant Sale and the Department of Environmental Horticulture Student Club Plant Sale

Plant material to be used:

Upright:
Alocasia, Colocasia, Xanthosoma (full sun to shade) depends on cultivar
Cordyline australis-newer hybrids Sundance, Torbay Dazzler, Sundance, Pink Stripe, Red Sensation, or Purple Tower (full sun)
Strobilanthus (shade)
Pennisetum (part sun/full sun)
Begonia sp. Angel Wing (shade)

Mounding:
Syngonium (shade)
Ferns (shade)
Trifolium (shade)
Heuchera 'Crimson Curls' (shade)
Alternanthera (full sun)
Philodendron (shade/part sun)
Pilea involucrate 'Moon Valley' (part sun/shade)

Trailing:
Pothos (shade)
Tradescantia (shade)
Ivy (shade)
Tradescantia zebrine 'Wandering Jew' (part sun/shade)
Lysimachia 'Goldilocks' (full sun)
Mercardonia 'Gold Flake' (full sun)

Follow-up:

The researchers would like to present their preliminary results at the 2007 or 2008 Tropical Plant Industry Exhibition. Information gleaned from the research projects will assist not only Florida foliage plant wholesale and retail professionals, but it will create canned packages of information for all U.S. foliage growers. Below are the components of the sales kits that the researchers will create.

Foliage container garden kits:

1. Detailed information sheets for foliage plants and combinations of foliage plant gardens that performed well in retail studies. These items can be cut and pasted to help foliage retailers with their signage or help wholesalers with their marketing materials.
2. Copies of all reports that were funded by the National Foliage Foundation
3. PowerPoint Presentations for foliage plant retailers
4. Suggested PGR concentrations, types, and application techniques for vigorous foliage plant species for foliage plant wholesalers
5. Popular press articles written to identify marketing strategies for foliage plants, how to conduct surveys, and evaluating the market data

How did you learn about this plant sale? (circle)

Newspaper	Radio	Internet
Marquee/Billboard	Word of mouth	Other:

How often do you typically purchase plants? (circle)

Rarely	Seasonally	Often

Reason you bought plant material today (circle):

Gift	For garden	Season to plant
Enjoy shopping	Interior houseplant	Hurricane replacement
Patio plant	Unique or unusual	Other:

We observed your purchase today, why did you choose this display? (circle)

Attractive	Convenient	Well stocked
Had to have	Clean and easy to shop	Well labeled
Spontaneous purchase	Atmosphere	No reason

What drew you to the display? (circle)

Color combination	Salesperson	Signs
Quality of plants	Quality of display	Plant type
Structure of display	Unique	Other:

How would you classify yourself as a gardener? (circle)

Novice	Intermediate	Experienced

How familiar are you with the plants you are purchasing today? (circle)

New to me	Somewhat Familiar	Very Familiar

Are you pleased with the quality of the plants? (circle)

No	Somewhat	Yes

Gender (circle):

Male	Female

Age:

15 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54	55+

Household Income (circle):

≤ $10,000	≥ $10,000	≥ $20,000
≥ $40,000	≥ $60,000	≥ $80,000
≥ $100,000	≥ $120,000	≥ $140,000

Education (circle):

Not a high school graduate	High school graduate	College tech graduate
4 year college graduate	Graduate degree	Other:

Number of adults in the household: _____
Number of children in the household: _____

THANKS and GO GATORS!