

Idea Exchange March 2004 - Keep the Meter Running

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Posted: March 1, 2004

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A water meter, easily attached to a hose, should be used whenever a pond is first filled, says Patrick Sullivan of Innovative Pond Products, a distributor in Escalon, Calif.

By using a water meter, the pond owner can learn the exact size of the pond in gallons, critical information for selecting pump and other equipment, dosing water treatments and fish medications, and even determining stocking density.

Estimating pond volume by guesses to its depth and surface area are far less reliable. If substantially off target, errant estimates can adversely affect the pond owner's success.

The meter is a necessary tool for any pond builder, he says. The exact volume of the pond can be measured, recorded and then given to the pond owner, as well as other specifications such as equipment type and models and maintenance schedules, as part of a pond owner's operating manual.

For businesses catering to do-it-yourselfers, consider implementing a meter loaner or rental program.

Big Easy Sales

American Aquatic Gardens in New Orleans lures customers with postcards instead of baubles.

Twice a year, the shop mails postcards announcing a drawing for nine gift certificates ranging from \$100 to \$500. To be eligible, customers must bring the card in and place it in a box in the gift shop.

"We usually get 650 to 700 cards returned each time," Sacher said. They have about 11,000 on their mailing list.

To clear out spent merchandise, they also mail out cards that entitle customers to 25 percent off one item in the nursery. "This fall, we had a special sale of 25 to 50 percent on any outdoor stock that had been on hand for nine months or longer," Sacher said. "That really cleared out some old stock in a hurry!"

Dress for Success

The Garden Revue Fashion Show was a highlight of the 2003 edition of the Western Nursery & Garden Expo in Las Vegas. Not only did California Association of Nurseries and Garden Centers staffers strut new garden gear along the catwalk, emcee Patrice Kuhl of Branch-Smith offered retailing advice.

Among the gems:

Garden apparel is one of the fastest-growing segments for garden centers.

If merchandising wind chimes indoors, operate a fan nearby to create breeze. The breeze will make the chimes chime. Their sound should be a key selling point.

During open houses and other special events, fill up a few large containers with ice and beverages. Nothing like a cool, refreshing drink to remind customers that there are attractive alternatives to garbage cans and industrial tubs for outdoor entertaining needs.

Political Parties

Invite elected officials to speak at open houses and other public events at your business, says Gary Jones of Aquarium Pharmaceuticals. Most politicians will be reluctant, especially during elections, to pass up an opportunity to address any audience, and there is a possibility that they may attract followers as well.

But the real reason to extend the invitations is so that these officials, who will be voting and implementing regulations that could affect your business, have a solid understanding of the economic contribution your business makes to the

community in terms of jobs and taxes and how emerging issues can impact your business, Jones said. A better understanding of water gardening itself could also prove useful for politicians voting on these issues.

This is particularly important as the water garden industry faces localized reactions to larger problems, such as restrictions on water features based on drought, invasive species or West Nile Virus concerns.

Water Garden News seeks your ideas on building water-garden businesses — whether it be better retailing, installation and design tips, how to retain and motivate employees, or how to market your business. We'll pay \$50 for published submissions. Please send your ideas (50-200 words) and photos if appropriate to: Idea Exchange, Water Garden News, 3 Burroughs, Irvine, CA 92618; fax (949) 855-3045, or e-mail bhutchins@fancypubs.com. Water Garden News cannot take responsibility for return of materials.

This column first appeared in the March 2004 issue of Water Garden News.
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