

Idea Exchange March 2005 - Embrace Innovation

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"Many businesses concern themselves solely with capital expenditure," said John Stanley, international conference speaker and retail consultant. "But in reality, it is low-cost flexibility that provides the real challenge."

Speaking to lawn and garden retailers from around the world at the debut of the John Stanley Innovation Centre at the Glee Petindex international garden and leisure show, Stanley outlined examples of such low-cost innovations, including new ways of thinking about merchandising display, signage, design and marketing.

One thing retailers need to do is take a fresh look at category management, he said. The key is integration. Why separate the pots from the plants? Merge the two with a little design flair to catch the customer's eye.

And don't stop with store layout and product displays; remember the customer.

Don't forget the basics. Say "thank you." And find a way to say it after they've left to store, to bring them back for more, says Stanley.

Tropical Mix

Given a choice, who wouldn't want to sell more tropical water lilies? They're generally replaced yearly and usually fetch a higher price. It's also possible that the broader array of colors and night-blooming features (when most pond owners are home) can increase overall satisfaction for pond owners.

To boost sales of tropical water lilies, display them with hardies, said Neal Lucht of Pacific Water Gardens and Eric Wood of Lily pads in Landscapes at their presentation, "Displaying and Selling Aquatic Plants," at Aquascape's 2004 Pond College.

A nice blend of hardies and tropicals in a display pond will give customers ideas of what is possible in their yards.

Be sure that plants are clearly marked to show customers what they're looking at; and that they're paying the right price.

If mixing plants isn't feasible, consider placing hardies in the back of the center so customers must walk past the tropicals to get to them; the old "milk in the back of the store" trick. This option works best for centers already known for stocking lilies. Retailers new to aquatic plants will be best served placing them in a high-visibility location.

One warning: wait until the water temperature is warm enough (about 65 degrees Fahrenheit) before bringing out the tropicals.

Troubleshooting Leaks

Patience is a virtue, especially when looking for leaks in water features.

To eliminate needless labor, Jan Phillips of Shady Lakes Water Gardens suggested the following approach for isolating leaks during her presentation at Pondapalooza 2004.

Fill the pond with water in the morning and turn off the pump. Check the pond after six hours to see if the water level has gone down.

If the water level has gone down, the leak is in the pond itself. If it hasn't gone down, run the pump overnight.

If the water level has gone down overnight, the leak is in the waterfall or the lines feeding it, not the pond itself.

Be sure not to turn the pump off at night when the pond's fish will need the oxygen. Phillips suggests monitoring the fish

even during the day test (pump off) to make sure they're not gasping for air.

Fishy Guarantees

One challenge that faces any fish seller is how to guarantee the product. Offering a guarantee suggests the seller believes he is selling healthy product. The problem is, who knows how it'll be treated or into what sort of water it will be placed?

One reasonable approach is the conditional guarantee in which the seller investigates the cause of any deaths through water testing and, possibly, necropsy.

The beauty of this plan is that if the cause of death can be determined, it can be solved. The retailer can sell whatever is necessary, be it water treatments, conditioners or equipment, to solve the problem.

We want your ideas on building water garden businesses. We'll pay \$50 for published submissions. Please send your ideas (50 to 200 words and photos, if any) to: Idea Exchange, 3 Burroughs, Irvine, CA 92618; fax: (949) 855-3045 or e-mail tbarthel@bowtieinc.com. Sorry, we cannot return materials.