

Faux Rock Sales Soar

Whether manufactured rock is used for lining ponds, creating bubbler rocks in disappearing fountains or adding another interest point in the garden, sales have been soaring at Hix & Sons Aquatics in Leawood, Kan.

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For some water garden retailers, faux rock sales have increased to 25 percent of overall rock sales. Courtesy of Hix & Sons Aquatics Whether manufactured rock is used for lining ponds, creating bubbler rocks in disappearing fountains or adding another interest point in the garden, sales have been soaring at Hix & Sons Aquatics in Leawood, Kan. Partner Wendy Hix says that about 50 percent of the business is in faux rock sales, and that the category has seen phenomenal growth.

Trevor Cameron, assistant general manager at Wight's Home and Garden in Lynnwood, Wash., says he stocks more faux rock every year.

"As people get tired of lifting heavy things and as the rocks look more realistic, these products have become more popular," Cameron says.

Wight's has carried faux rock for almost a decade. During that stretch, faux rock sales have increased to now comprise about 25 percent of the overall rock sales, Cameron says.

"We anticipate faux rock really growing in the next few years," Cameron says. "It's the new wave."

Bubbler faux rocks add another point of interest in the garden. Courtesy of Hix & Sons Aquatics Self-contained manufactured rock structures with waterfalls have been big sellers, says Peggy Munro, the owner of Munro's Landscaping and Water Gardens, Inc. in Homosassa, Fla. Munro has seen a 50 percent jump in her sales of faux rock products since she opened shop four years ago.

"These seem to be really popular right now," says Munro, who has carried these decorative items for a few years.

Cameron says he has seen a good return on self-contained units at Wight's. But he says columnar rock pieces, which have produced solid sales, will continue to grow, too.

"We'll really get into selling more of those within the next year," Cameron says.

In-ground, small-scale water gardens and ponds made from faux rock have also picked up their sales pace this year, Cameron says.

Stocking the Right Rock Trevor Cameron of Wight's Home and Garden in Lynnwood, Wash., has several tips for stocking the right products. He says he looks for pieces that fit with the environment.

"You want it to fit into your natural landscape," Cameron suggests.

He also looks for pieces that fit with his customers' style. Cameron gets his staff together to look for popular styles in catalogues to fit the requests of their customers. He asks about the manufacturing process and reviews the manufactures warranties to keep costs down from defective merchandise.

"We've found some really good products out there and some really bad ones," Cameron says.

Like other product categories, he rotates out old inventory when new products arrive to the shop.

"We look at new things and attend a lot of shows," Cameron says. "We really try to turn things over twice a year and bring new things in."

Cameron suggests attending trade shows in different regions of the country to see different merchandise than you do locally.

"We've found a lot of things out east that haven't made it west yet," Cameron says.

LOOKING THE PART

With so many artistic pieces of faux rock on the market, each retailer has particular strategies and key benefits he or she focuses on when selecting inventory.

Hix says she looks at the texture, the colors, and the turnaround time and availability of a product when deciding what to carry.

“The textures look more real than ever before,” Hix says. “I look at how they are made and the quality, too.”

Color selection is a big factor for Cameron. His staff looks for muted colors when choosing faux rock pieces.

“Grays and stains with subtle color are very popular,” Cameron says. “Red colors and the terracotta look are on the by-and-by.”

Customers will likely choose faux rock over the real thing if they can see the benefits of the product, which include greater affordability and easier installation, Hix says.

Wally Kerwin, owner of Swanson’s Nursery in Seattle, Wash., agrees that faux rock will continue to outshine its natural counterpart with time.

“I don’t know if people really understand faux rock yet,” Kerwin says. “They don’t understand how light and convenient it is.”

Unlike pumps and filters, which don’t offer much beautification to a nursery area, faux rock creations, such as waterfalls will sell themselves and make other products stand out as well.

The benefits of faux rock over the real thing include greater affordability and easier installation. Courtesy of Hix & Sons Aquatics “The best thing to do is to put them where customers can actually see them, such as a point-of-purchase sales in the front,” says Casey Castillo, the owner of Natural Creations, Inc., a commercial and residential design and construction company that also manufactures its own artificial rock in Renton, Wash. “Customers don’t even make it into the door without seeing it, and the rest of the time they are in the store they are looking back and saying, ‘I should get one of those.’”

Hix helps her customers visualize what the faux rock will look like in their own gardens by using her personal backyard as her display counter.

“I have no grass in the back of the store,” Hix says. “It’s completely landscaped to show how you would use these rocks in your own yard,”

Retailers display faux rocks in natural outdoor settings to show customers how easily they will blend into their own landscapes. Courtesy of Hix & Sons Aquatics **SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED**

Without a sign alerting customers that the product is a manufactured version of a rock, a customer may not realize what they’ve cast their eyes upon.

Cameron says signage is key to grabbing customers’ attention. He highlights the weight of the product and the estimated manpower it takes to deliver and set up the faux rock.

“We have signs up showing what it is and what the features of the product are,” Cameron says.

For example, a large piece of faux rock weighs about 80 pounds while a concrete version of the same design weighs close to a half ton, he says.

Munro says that advertising has helped increase sales.

“People see it in the ad and then come in looking for the pieces,” Munro says.

Self-contained manufactured rock structures with waterfalls have been big sellers for many retailers. Courtesy of Natural Creations Promotions are also a way to create buzz and raise awareness of the benefits of new products, Cameron says.

Next spring, Cameron plans to host workshops on weekends to allow faux rock manufacturers to highlight the ease of use and portability of their products directly to customers. Cameron suggests hosting a training session with the staff so they can get to know the products.

“We always have someone on staff to go over the basics with customers who have questions,” Cameron says.

Scott and Ann Springer are frequent contributors to Water Garden News. Their last article, “Tapping into the Giftware Market,” appeared in the August issue.