

# Inspiring the Imaginations of Your Customers

*By Nancy Gresham:*

Container gardening is a strong trend among gardeners, as well as budding gardeners, and even for non-gardeners who simply wish to beautify their patios. All of these people will appreciate some inspiration in designing their containers. As more people enjoy the attributes of home and their own nests, they are learning to recognize the value of container gardening. And the more they experiment, the more containers they wish to use for gardening and decorating. Decorating with containers lends its own ambience and style and makes a statement about the homeowner's tastes and interests. This all translates into dollars for nurseries, for bigger, more beautiful and well made containers that can span the seasons, and for plants to decorate containers throughout the year.

The growing interest in container gardening is due partly to the demographics of our population, which is becoming a more ripe generation, as well as a group with more expendable income. Also, the young people are busy with families and making a living, and know they will spend less time in weeding by using containers. Containers can be planted without too much physical strain while home-owners can still enjoy the pleasures of choosing plants and watching them flower and grow. I realized this year that strawberries actually do ripen faster in strawberry planters, and are right there for the picking!

It is important to encourage your customer to purchase a well made piece of pottery that is either frost resistant, or in the Mexican pottery, has a protective paint on the inside. Even the more primitive hand made Mexican pieces without the coating on my own patio have weathered well for years outside in the Montana elements. Although it is a common concern for many, in my experience, pottery will weather even in severe climates. Many people like the aging the weathering and time provides.

As natural beauty in indoor as well as outdoor decorating is being cultivated, more commercial buildings are using containers to soften and enhance the architecture, inside and out. Container plantings often define the business as being more elegant, classy, as well as sending an understated message that the company is more concerned about customer satisfaction. For the nursery owner, the larger containers for these purposes can mean bigger initial sales as well as multi-season purchase of plants to keep the containers looking beautiful.

There are many strategies to cater to the container gardeners, which will enhance the nursery's business. People with good taste and little time appreciate the ability to purchase a

container that has been professionally planted. Having these displayed and ready for purchase at the nursery will not only generate sales of those planted containers, with less time spent by your staff, but also will inspire imaginations, so that those plantings will be copied, translating to more plant sales, more beautiful landscapes, and more people wanting more beautiful landscapes. A great benefit is that your nursery will be even more beautiful, unique, interesting to visit, and a joy to gardening shoppers.

The most beautiful container planting designs enhance the chosen piece of pottery and actually become a work of art. This can be done by either designing a planting in a plastic container and inserting it into a pottery container, especially for the larger, heavier containers, or planting directly into the pottery container, especially with smaller containers. Some of the most pleasing planted designs echo colors in the piece of pottery. Many nursery owners have experienced improved sales using this strategy

Evergreen planting designs are also becoming more popular, so that the container has something growing and green all year long. Homeowners and nurseries can add to these containers during the growing season with more seasonal plants.

Another strategy to encourage sales in the fall is to display designs in containers using fall boughs and other decorative items such as bird houses and bird nests. One of my favorite is a bird's nest with several rocks in it, nestled in a bed of spruce boughs.

Pottery displays can be beautiful in themselves, with like colors in different designs stacked together. Or again, to inspire the imagination of a shopper, group pieces of pottery together that would make a nice patio planting display. And to further the idea, make groupings of planted containers. Another idea is to make a display of a particular plant in a container beside the plant groupings. Someone who wouldn't have thought of buying the plant to put in the ground, may purchase it as a container planting.

So, the whole idea is to inspire our customers to beautify their yards and patios. And if we have something special to see at our nurseries, people will be more apt to shop there. Our nurseries will be even more beautiful for us as well as for our customers.

*Nancy Gresham is owner of Imports West in Corvallis, Montana, which is a wholesale distributor for home and garden statuary, as well as pottery, furniture, and accessories. Imports West will be exhibiting at MNLA's 2006 Annual Meeting & Trade Show in Helena in January.*