



Expanding their reach

Retail nurseries are using a multi-pronged approach to reach their customers

Al's Garden & Home is working with a marketing firm to identify brand perception and customer profiles to discover what message resonates with each most effectively. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALS GARDEN & HOME

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

Marketing in the retail nursery industry hinges on connecting with customers and addressing their diverse needs. But it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. New gardeners may need basic education and reliable plants to stay engaged, while experienced gardeners may crave rare plants and deeper information.

Preferences are shaped by factors like climate and lifestyle, making effective marketing and communication an art worth honing. Let's see how nurseries and gardening groups are striking this balance.

But first, let's look at the big picture.

The national outlook

Surveying 1,400 U.S. homeowners with above-average income, **Monrovia's** 2025 Design Trend report shows gardeners are getting more ambitious and spending more. Along with monthly studies of 100,000 email subscribers on plant types, colors and gardening style, the national grower identified three key gardening personas:

- **"Wellness Gardeners,"** typically women 55+ in age, show moderate spending at both home stores and independent garden centers (IGCs), remains stable at 29% of the market.

- **"Easy Seekers,"** an all-age, all-gender group that spends the least, usually at home stores, is down 5% since last year to 33%.

- **"Ambitious Gardeners,"** 25-54 years old and skewing male, comprising 38% of the market, are up 7%, with an annual spending of \$593 per person in 2024.

What motivates these gardeners? Of respondents, 58% said their main motivation in gardening is the feeling of accomplishment they get when a plant grows well. This has been the primary motivator for several years. Other motivations gaining momentum include: gardening for wellness and self-care, nostalgia gardening, natural gardening, and pollinator gardening.

Breaking down the results:

- 39% say "gardening is my 'me time'" (up 8% since last year).
- 36% say "gardening reminds me of

simpler times and makes me feel nostalgic" (up 4%).

- 28% say "I like to have my garden have a natural look" (up 6%); and

- 26% say "I am gardening for pollinators" (up 6%).

"We've seen a surge of more young men 35-45 being into gardening as a hobby, not just mowing the lawn and taking care of their landscape, but really being interested in plants which we in the industry think is just fascinating because it represents a new audience with maybe new motivations and challenges we haven't thought about in the past," said Monrovia's Chief Marketing Officer Katie Tamony in a recent webinar. Monrovia is a California-based wholesale nursery that operates its largest farm in Dayton, Oregon.

Targeting Oregon gardeners

At **Al's Garden & Home**, co-owner Mark Bigej emphasizes understanding customer segments to optimize marketing. Al's is working with a marketing firm ➤

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to identify brand perception and customer profiles to discover what message resonates with each most effectively.

Al's operates four locations in Oregon (Sherwood, Woodburn, Wilsonville and Gresham), each with unique demographics, relying on sales data and customer feedback to fine-tune product selections. "It's a mix. We have to gauge for each store the products we are selling," he said. "Customers tell us if something isn't working — it doesn't move."

Typically, Al's customers are female, aged 35–65, but the company is actively working to engage male shoppers. The in-house marketing team, including a director managing social media and a graphic designer, adjusts strategies to reach different sectors. Instagram is used for younger audiences, while Facebook targets more mature ones.

"Email remains very strong for us," Bigej said. After trying a twice-weekly schedule, Al's is back to sending the newsletter three times weekly due to popular demand.

Bigej notes that success can be tracked through coupons, loyalty programs, social media response and email open rates, but the impact on their sales is the truest barometer. "Ultimately what we are going to measure is our average number of customers who walk into the door," he said. "How many transactions we get — that'll be where the rubber meets the road."

Al's Garden Rewards loyalty program is responsible for a whopping 85% of sales, said Bigej. "It's been one of our biggest and best long-term investments." Rewards members receive perks like rebates and discounts during exclusive Garden Rewards events, while "Color Dollars," rebate dollars earned with purchases, entice non-members to return. Al's also offers QR codes and printed plant information for customers less inclined toward technology.

Creative marketing successes include work done by Bigej's niece, Annie Cantonwine, an assistant visual merchandise manager who attends product shows and keeps tabs on social media trends. "Last year she identified a disco theme for our Christmas displays and hit it out of the park," said Bigej. A customer fell in



Al's mines product shows and social media trends to inform its creative marketing and displays. Last year, the visual merchandise manager identified a disco theme for Christmas displays that proved a huge hit. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALS GARDEN & HOME

love with the themed decorated trees and said, "I want everything on that 10-foot tree — and I want three of them."

"It was a huge order, and she had to pull stock from all of our stores," Bigej said.

"Whether you are big or small, that's always a challenge, trying to put your marketing dollars to their highest use," said Bigej. "You've just got to try things and measure the results."

Dan Heims, owner of **Terra Nova Nurseries** (Canby, Oregon) said his wholesale nursery aims to support both pull-through and push marketing by creating plants that are easy for all audiences to enjoy. "We make as it easy as possible for them," he says.

Heims said by making better performing plants, he improves the experience of everyone from the growers to retailers, designers, landscapers and home gardeners. An example is *Coleus*. Once notorious for needing constant pinching to fill out,

now thanks to Terra Nova's breeding of self-branching cultivars, "a grower can root a cutting in a pot and never have to touch it."

When it comes to identifying trends, Heims watches trend reports like that of Garden Media Group and follows industry magazines like *Digger*, *Grower Talks*, and *Fine Gardening*. In addition to listening to feedback about requests for new plants, he does his own research, too. "I go to garden centers and see what people are throwing in their carts."

Terra Nova finds creative ways to capitalize on wider trends, too, like annually promoting plants that go with Pantone's Color of the Year, which often signals color choices in décor — inside and out. Thus, customers can find on-trend patio cushions and candles and a heuchera to match.

Heims cites Terra Nova initiatives like including CDs of information in catalogs back in the day and more recently,



For Portland Nursery, casual backyard gardeners form the core of its clientele. PHOTO COURTESY OF PORTLAND NURSERY

creating upside-down reverse-side plant tags with icons. Terra Nova employs a marketing firm, Eberly & Collard Public Relations. Now, while the information offered is videos rather than CDs, Heims said, “We provide all the materials so any nursery owner can download bed tags and add their name to it.”

Heims sees Gen Z as the next frontier. “They will be bigger than the Boomers. It’s just too huge a generation to ignore. People buying homes drive the market, and Gen Z is just starting. They are breaking out of the mold of houseplants to try perennials.”

At **Portland Nursery** owner Sara Ori said the customers are a blend, but “casual backyard gardeners” form the core of its clientele.

“Being closer into the city, we get everyone from people buying a houseplant for their first apartment to serious hobbyists and professional landscapers,” she said.

She keeps on top of customer needs through “trade shows, gardening magazines, hot topics at our information desk/social media.” She has seen greater numbers of young people, including families with kids, and “an uptick in in people wanting native plants and environmentally conscious choices.”

However, she notes, while they may spotlight a trending plant on social media or the newsletter, “I wouldn’t say our marketing strategies change too much with the emerging trends. We do always focus on key ingredients to our offerings: quality plant material, diverse selection and gardening education.”

In communication, she doesn’t differentiate among experience levels. “I think

the most effective way to balance reaching new gardeners with more experienced gardeners is to talk with them in-store,” she said.

“Ask them about their projects, always assume they are just starting out and get them the resources they need to be successful. When you can go above and beyond, people share that with their friends. Word of mouth is still our best form of advertising and how we get new gardeners in the door.”

Amy Coulter, executive director of Hardy Plant Society of Oregon said, “Our members are as varied as the plants at any nursery It’s impossible to put them all in one box.”

The organization, celebrating its 40th year, reaches a wide expanse of plant lovers through private garden open days, plant sales, educational offerings, and nursery tours. Open garden hosts can include nursery owners, ecologists, landscape designers and architects, among others, while gardener members run the gamut of experience, style, and location.

She said 42% of the 3000 active members joined after 2020, indicating that the pandemic-era gardeners are still going strong.

Climate-aware gardening has become central to HPSO’s education. For example, Swedish researcher Henrik Sjöman recently spoke to a packed house about *Dendro futura*, the “trees of the future,” a species suited for climate change. The popularity of such events highlights the hunger for climate-resilient gardening knowledge.

HPSO events like nursery tours and garden tours help bridge experience levels, >>

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Expanding their reach

allowing beginners and experts to share ideas in person.

“We partner with nurseries for members to visit, shop, snack, socialize, and learn about the nursery’s business,” said Coulter. “This draws out every level of gardener at HPSO — the curious beginner to the advanced plant shopaholic”

At the members-only Open Garden days, “An extremely skilled gardener opening their garden may have novice gardeners visit, and vice-versa,” she said. “The sense of community across skill levels and demographics and the potential knowledge transfer at this grass-roots level are exceptional.”

Who will tomorrow’s gardeners and garden-center customers be? All of our experts stay close to their audience, find creative ways to connect with them, respond to feedback and offer quality information to set them up for success, ensuring a thriving garden market and culture for years to come. ☺

Erica Browne Grivas is an award-winning journalist and gardener pushing zone boundaries in Seattle, Washington. She can be reached at EBGrivas@gmail.com.



Portland Nursery focuses on on key ingredients: quality plant material, diverse selection and gardening education. PHOTO COURTESY OF PORTLAND NURSERY



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