

# What gardeners look for at garden centers



Salem gardener Michael Cushing loves going to garden centers to find unusual and interesting plants to bring home to his garden. One that did well in his garden this year was *Pleione* 'Tongariro'. PHOTO BY MIKE CUSHING

**W**ith 2025 ending and a new year beginning, it seems like a good time to get some feedback from gardeners on what their vision is for their garden. What do they look for when deciding on a garden center and what plants to buy?

Hearing what gardeners have to say about their gardens can be useful to garden centers. We can always benefit from fresh ideas. The visions presented here are from those who enjoy the art of gardening. They are not members of the industry.

The major question was what is your vision for your garden and what makes you go to a particular garden center?

## Lisa Fuller

Lisa Fuller is an avid southwest Portland gardener who has gardened in

her current location for almost 20 years. Lisa says her garden is pretty mature now and she loves some of it but other parts she wants to change but need new ideas.

At garden centers, she likes to see display gardens that change with the seasons, masterful container plantings, and well-conceived displays. She wants to see eye-catching combinations of plants that complement one another, especially when trees and shrubs are the backbone, like in a real garden.

Lisa says parking should not be a hassle and there should be places to sit. Pathways should be relatively flat/level and restrooms should be easily accessible. Knowledgeable salespersons are a necessity and if they cannot answer a question, they should find someone who can. Garden centers should have depth in qual-



Mike Darcy

Head "plant nerd," longtime speaker, host of gardening shows on radio and TV, and author of the *In the Garden* email newsletter. You can reach Mike, or subscribe to his newsletter, at [ITGMikeDarcy@Comcast.net](mailto:ITGMikeDarcy@Comcast.net).



Portland gardener Lisa Fuller's favorite plant this past season, *Senecio candicans* 'Angel Wings', was not new, but was introduced in the last few years. PHOTO BY LISA FULLER

ity garden supplies and tools and leave the mediocre brands to the big box stores. She understands the most requested plants have to be stocked but thinks a higher percentage should be devoted to the new introductions. Everybody wants what's new!

Lisa's favorite plant this past season was not new, but was introduced in the last few years. It is *Senecio candicans* 'Angel Wings'. Although winter tender (but fine if kept in an unheated greenhouse), it was a star in her part shade garden, where anything to lighten and brighten the palette is needed. This plant is a beacon of silver that helps lift all the other silvers and grays.

## Ruth and Gary Clark

Ruth Clark and her husband, Gary, 

## What I'm Hearing

have a three-acre garden just outside Vancouver, Washington. The garden was designed around several gigantic walnut trees. Originally it was an open expanse of lawn, but there have been changes over the years with the addition of beds and paths, retaining walls, garden art, and a shed.

Gary has a large shop and creates metal garden art that can be seen throughout the garden.

Ruth said that she really became a gardener when she moved to the Pacific Northwest 25 years ago. She likes nurseries that have unusual or hard-to-find plants, and she always enjoys a good gift shop.

"I will stop at any garden center that catches my eye, and I look for interesting plant selections, healthy, weed-free plants, and decent prices," she said. "On an outing with friends, I might go to four or five nurseries in one day. We like to string together nurseries in one geographic area and are always excited to find a new favorite. We may go back to some of those nurseries every year after that."

### Jolly Butler

Jolly Butler has gardened in Portland for over 40 years and considers gardening a great passion. She considers her garden a private, calm place with shrubs and lots of flowers. Her garden is named Millefiori which is a combination of the Italian words, "mille" (thousand) and "fiori" (flowers).

When Jolly visits a garden center, she considers the outing in one of three categories: to get something new and unique, to perhaps visit an old friend by buying a familiar plant, or to experience a new adventure! She believes that a garden center should have healthy plants, a good variety of plants (including old favorites and new selections), and a helpful and friendly staff. Restrooms should be prominently signed and easily available.

Like many gardeners, Jolly enjoys seeing seasonal displays at garden centers. Often such displays can trigger a new idea or new a plant combination. In Jolly's garden, she likes year-round interest and often uses evergreens. Her philosophy is that flowers are often short lived, whereas evergreens last throughout the year and



Gary Clark has a large shop and creates metal garden art for his garden. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

continue for many more years.

### Michael Cushing

Salem gardener Michael Cushing has always been a fan of nature, plants and flowers. He got his first actual gardening experience when he was in his 30s and living in Juneau, Alaska. He said that Alaska has an extremely challenging hardiness zone.

"After 25 years of fighting darkness, ice, and slugs, I moved to the Willamette Valley where I discovered that gardening was an addiction, also known as a hobby," he said.

Michael's garden has moderate to heavy shade on a steep, north-facing slope. He has two major motivators to go to a garden center. One is to search for unusual and interesting plants that will hopefully thrive in his garden environment. The second is to see extensive and nicely designed display gardens that would invite customers to wander and experience the nursery's plants in a garden setting.

Michael enjoys the luxury of often hearing presentations by garden center owners and their staff. He believes that a good presentation often leads to a visit to the presenter's business. He visits a variety of garden centers on a regular basis to get that one plant that he envisioned and coming home with five or more. A particular

plant that did well in his garden this year is Tongariro orchid (*Pleione* 'Tongariro').

### Tom Bland

Lake Oswego gardener Tom Bland started his love of gardening at the early age of 5. His mother was an avid gardener, and she gave him a plot of land to start a vegetable garden. His current garden has lots of shade, and that limits the plant palette.

To help compensate for the limitations of a shade garden for many annuals and for a vegetable garden, Tom and his wife, Diane, have a community garden space that gets full sun. Here he can grow annuals for summer color and have a vegetable garden.

Their home garden is a Certified Backyard Habitat, with a requirement that 25% of the space be devoted to native plants.

In the spring, Tom will buy lots of assorted annuals for summer color for both the home and community garden. After this initial garden center visit, Tom will visit a garden center with a specific plant in mind. His philosophy is that if he finds a neat plant, he will find the space. Plant selection is more important to him than displays. Tom goes through garden phases. Once it was rhododendrons, then daphne, and now bonsai.

### Gene Rozenboom

Gardening has been a lifelong pursuit for south Portland gardener Gene Rozenboom. Gene began gardening in his teens and has not stopped. His garden has transformed over the past dozen years from an overgrown, neglected landscape to a beautiful unique urban garden.

Gene describes his garden as a formal, orderly, natural garden. He is always on the lookout for the unique and unusual, and especially plants that he has not seen before. He frequently visits garden centers for new ideas.

When visiting garden centers, neatness is a priority. He does not want to see dead or wilted plants. Pathways should be clean, and preferably paved. Gene's ideal of a good garden center does not include having to walk around on muddy, wet pathways.

The sales staff should be happy and helpful and not look bored. He looks for displays with a broad range of plants. That is especially important for getting new ideas for mixing plants. He loves seeing containers planted, because he has many in his garden and new ideas are always welcome.

Gene focuses on several different categories of plants, including dwarf conifers, Japanese maples, and ferns. He is always on the lookout for more! He has recently added a new perennial bed to his garden which opens a new area for plants. As the saying goes, there is always room for one more.

### The common message

Gardeners are a very diverse group with certain standards for the ideal garden center. Perhaps no single garden center is going to be able to satisfy every gardener, but the message from these gardeners says that neatness is very important as well as a knowledgeable and friendly sales crew.

Having unique and unusual plants is also important. Perhaps that could become the basis of a new monthly display. Gardeners depend on garden centers to meet all their unique gardening needs and enjoy visiting their favorites frequently. They are all delighted that garden centers are such an active part of our horticulture community.

Happy New Year! ©

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