



Figure 16-4. Full service garden center.

Retail nurseries fit into several categories. These include cash and carry nurseries; garden centers that offer plants and a full line of related items; full service nurseries (Figure 16-4) that typically provide not only plants and other materials on a cash and carry basis but also delivery, design, installation, and maintenance services; and landscape nurseries that often specialize in design, installation and/or maintenance.

Some cash and carry nurseries provide no service, no quality assurance, and little or no warranty. Unfortunately, if the buyer receives any information, it may be incorrect because typically the salesperson has had no plant training. Many plants sold through this type of outlet are of good quality, but unless the buyer knows plant quality, they cannot be sure about any individual purchase.

Florists can provide goods and services similar to retail nurseries. Many florists handle a line of plants for interior use, and many full service nurseries have an onsite florist in conjunction with their operations.

Merchandising

Selling is one of the most important activities that occur in the nursery. If a nursery cannot profitably sell its products or services and keep its customers coming back, it will cease to be in business. Consequently, sales personnel must truly understand the importance of their role in the nursery's success, whether wholesale or retail.

It is impossible to write a prescription for selling that would be effective in every situation, but certain basics will almost always apply. Successful selling requires bringing a buyer and seller together, relating the product or service to a need or desire, and sometimes creating that desire. Good selling occurs when there is mutual satisfaction of the buyer and seller;

in other words, the buyer is convinced they are receiving full value and the seller is pleased with the profit. The factors that produce success in sales are the same, regardless of the product.

Specifically, customers want a product that will perform well for them under the conditions for which it will be used. This means the horticulture industry needs to provide plants that will grow well where they are placed. For example, if plants were to be installed in a beach area, it would be essential that the plants sold had salt tolerance. Here the horticulturist must have plant knowledge in order to meet this need.

Qualified Industry Personnel

In order to prosper, a factor common to all nurseries today is the need for sound business decisions to guide management of the nursery. One sound business practice is to hire qualified personnel. Although the purpose of this chapter is not to provide instruction in business management, the primary goal of the FCHP program and this text is to upgrade the professional qualities of people in the industry.

Quality

If one word were used to describe the desires of customers when purchasing almost anything, it would be quality. This is especially true with plants. It is imperative that high quality plants are sold by reputable horticulture businesses. Although the customer frequently does not know what constitutes plant quality, professional horticulturists must know what a high quality plant is in order to sell successfully. Standards used to specify the quality of plants will be discussed later in this chapter.

A high quality plant will justify the confidence customers place in the salesperson. Selection of the right high quality plant for the right place at a fair price will represent good value to the customer and will usually lead to more sales. Remember this universal truth in sales: a fair price does not always mean the lowest price. Even a fairly priced, worthwhile product does not sell itself. It typically requires promotion through advertising, personal selling, publicity, and good display, usually as a combination of most or all of these. Finally, after a high quality product, the key to successful selling is the salesperson.

Displays

Well displayed is half sold; high quality plants deserve to be attractively displayed. As with most products, the initial impression often determines the mood to purchase and, more importantly, whether the customer returns as a regular patron. Therefore, good merchandising displays, eye appeal, orderliness, effective lighting, ample aisles, and enticing focal points that encourage traffic throughout the sales area are all factors that should be reviewed regularly for maximum sales effectiveness (Figure 16-5). On peak traffic days or during busy hours, good planning and layout of the store and sales areas can induce customers to shop on the premises without assistance or at least remain occupied until a salesperson is available.

A few basic ideas and principles to consider in sales area planning include:

- 1) The area at the entrance is probably the most valuable of all display spaces; therefore, it should be used for the most attractive, timely, sales-appealing “window dressing.” Here is where a first impression creates an image, good or poor, that can remain fixed in a customer’s mind. The front display should be maintained, interesting, appealing, and changed at regular intervals.
- 2) Merchandise having not only eye appeal, but also rapid turnover and good profit margin, should be located in the best traffic areas to generate maximum attention, sales and profits.
- 3) The common staples, usually lower profit margin items such as fertilizers, soil amendments, and even some of the better known and regularly requested items, can be located in less accessible stock areas. While moving toward these areas, the customer will get a broader exposure to merchandise commonly purchased on impulse.



Figure 16-5. Garden center display.

- 4) Attractive, informative displays and strategically located directional signs should have the effect of intriguing customers to explore all the sales areas.
- 5) Seasonal merchandise should be given a good display, commencing early enough to capitalize on the full season.
- 6) Housekeeping should be a daily chore, keeping merchandise, fixtures, and displays clean and inviting.
- 7) Related items should be featured together in a sample display. For example, plants, containers, soil or planting media, and fertilizers should be grouped together. This type of merchandising not only serves the interests of the customer but can also increase sales.
- 8) Advertised items should be featured prominently for effective point-of-sale promotion.
- 9) All merchandise should be identified correctly and the price clearly marked. Unpriced items are frequently passed by because customers are often reluctant to inquire about the price. Unpriced merchandise can also cause frustrating delays and confusion at the cash register.



Figure 16-6. Professional sales person with well labeled merchandise.

Salesmanship

The key to successful selling is good management and well qualified, trained sales personnel who provide excellent customer service. The salesperson must be knowledgeable, experienced, presentable, and have a good attitude. Confidence of the customer in the salesperson is generated mainly by that person's knowledge of the product and how the product should be used and maintained. Customers remember and ask for a salesperson who has proven qualified, reliable, and exceeds expectations; such a person is obviously an asset to the business. Knowledge of the product comes with love of the job, study, observation, and seasoned experience (Figure 16-6).

Selling requires the ability to relate knowledge of the product to customer needs and wants, as well as patience and skill for completing the sale. It is important to maintain eye contact and use the appropriate body language throughout sales communications. Some people easily acquire these skills, while others find the transition to selling so difficult that they move into other areas of work.

Nonetheless, the personal appearance of a salesperson when meeting the customer is very

important. In a garden center or nursery, sales personnel usually must perform several roles, such as maintaining stock, setting up displays, and keeping the store and sales areas orderly and inviting. Successful businesses will have certain minimum standards of dress to provide a neat, professional appearance for their sales personnel.

Ultimately, the decision to buy or not to buy always rests with the customer; therefore, the customer's point of view is of the greatest importance at all times. A friendly greeting

provided to the customer upon entering the store, or recognition by name of a regular patron, is a due courtesy and generally expected. The customer will usually indicate whether help is needed or if they are “just looking,” so be sure to always respect the customer’s shopping wishes. Remember, many people will seek out businesses that provide good customer service and can be the best word of mouth advertisement when that service is received. The bottom line is customers are the people keeping a business open and thriving.

Techniques for Successful Selling

Interest in a particular plant or product can provide the clue to whether the need is a landscape project, a gift, a problem with weeds, a disease, an insect, or something else. The salesperson must make a decision about how much time is justified for a particular situation.

With experience, the alert and interested salesperson can sense or determine the customer’s needs. Courtesy, tact, knowledge of a product, and the desire to help can prevent overselling or underselling. Recognize that customers sometimes need assistance in making up their minds, but hard pressure selling is seldom justified.

A salesperson must have all the pertinent facts to advise or make recommendations, and this may require some in-depth questioning. The salesperson must know, for example, the size of the area the customer wishes to plant, light, sun, heat, or cold exposure, the soil environment, height and spread allowances, color and texture preferences, and any special conditions such as salt exposure to be able to make suggestions for the right plant in the right place.

Tie-in Sales

Good salespeople who are prepared to recommend materials and procedures for successful planting provide a vital service to the customer. Items such as potting soil, soil amendments, mulch, fertilizers, containers, tools, and pesticides are known as tie-in sales (Figure 16-7). These items may enhance the success or aesthetics of the original purchase. Instructions for proper planting can minimize complaints, curtail returned goods, and promote customer satisfaction and goodwill. Appropriate tie-in sales and an expressed interest in the future of the products purchased are marks of good salesmanship, regardless of the product being sold.



Figure 16-7. Pots, soil, gloves, tools, labels and watering can tie in with sale of plants.

Professional Replies

When price is used as an excuse for not buying, the real reason might be something deeper. Completing or losing the sale might depend upon a simple, well-timed remark or suggestion such as, "Picture how this showy plant will accent the entrance to your home!" When price is the real culprit and the customer cites an advertised special at a discount house, emphasize grade, quality, service and the nursery's reputation for standing by its products. Thoughts interjected along these lines can usually swing the sale in favor of the nursery.

Keeping customers (and supervisors) happy should be a top priority. Simply cultivating the habit of being courteous, helpful, and friendly is among the many ways to please customers. Regardless of the situation, bad-mouthing or downgrading competition is poor practice and can result in bad impressions and/or lost sales. Emphasize positive reasons for buying rather than making negative comments.



Figure 16-8. Professional finish to quality landscape maintenance job.

Professional Appearance

Personal appearance of employees is an area that is frequently overlooked or ignored. Landscape maintenance and nursery work is hard, dirty labor. No one expects workers to be immaculately dressed. However, uniforms lend a professional touch. If changed daily, a worker can still look presentable in the late afternoon. Often, young male workers like to take their shirts off in hot, sweaty situations, but there are many people who object to this even if they do not say so; it could be the reason they select a new company with which to do business. Additionally, from the standpoint of safety, workers should keep their shirts on.

The appearance of equipment is equally important to a professional image. Large equipment can provide a free advertising area for the placement of neat, attractive signs. If equipment is in poor condition, the customer perceives a poor quality image of the company. Certainly, it is much easier to keep customers satisfied if interactions are professional in all aspects, appearance included.

The little finishing touches that are sometimes overlooked are also important to overall customer satisfaction. In any professional landscape maintenance business, check at the end of the job to be sure all walks have been swept or blown clean, all debris has been properly disposed of, all gates have been closed, and items that were moved have been replaced (Figure 16-8). In the garden center, be sure to greet the customer by name upon arrival, let them know of a special item just received, and take merchandise to their car and carefully secure it for transport. Remember, the little things that do not cost anything provide the greatest level of customer satisfaction and generate repeat, loyal clients.