

RENEW NOW



Foliage for the great indoors

Like bell-bottom pants and shag haircuts, indoor foliage plants were trendy in the '70s. Savvy growers could once again spark interest by following these tips.



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Marketing foliage plants may seem like a challenge, but if properly positioned, and with the right grower/retailer partnering efforts, foliage plants can experience resurgence in sales.



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The first step toward growing this segment is for growers to identify progressive retailers who are willing to try new communication and merchandising methods. Sure, growers are busy people. Retailers are, too. But, when a grower takes the initiative to help facilitate sales (rather than simply sell a plant), the progressive retailers will pay attention and likely jump on the opportunity to make another sale.

Bottom line: when the retailer sells a plant, the wholesaler and grower sell a plant. Collaborative efforts yield more results than individual efforts.

First things first

Growers and retailers want customers to be successful when buying plants so that customers will purchase more. When growers work with retailers, growers are able to provide the information retailers need. Retailers then pass that info along to their customers so they can determine, for themselves, the right products to convey the holistic concept of thriving foliage plants, in the home. That information should include these five building blocks for success: plant, container, medium, water, and light. Putting the proper plant in the right media, with the right light, in the right container, and the right amount of water, can make a big difference in whether that foliage plant lives or dies.

Many foliage plants will survive quite well in low light conditions. But what exactly does low light look like? Certainly most foliage plants won't thrive in a closet, so professionals might want to explain to customers what a minimum amount of light looks like. Light meters may have gone the way of shag haircuts, but here too, growers have an opportunity to work with retailers to show and tell what low light looks like.

Most retailers are well-prepared to convey light levels outdoors, but helping retailers to explain what lower light levels look like, and make light-appropriate plant selections, will help them and their customers be more successful. I like the "shadow" test. For low light, a hint of shadow is effective. A modest, fuzzy shadow for a few hours of the day may enable some selections to perform well. And a bright light may show off distinctive shadows to help spur interest. Growers can help retailers by using terminology that is relatable (like distinct or fuzzy shadow) to help define high or moderate indoor light.

One of the issues in lower light conditions is overwatering. Help customers solve overwatering problems by working with retailers to find size appropriate, and more importantly, proper growing media, and watering solutions. How can a grower make it easier, and thus more desirable, for a customer to want to have an indoor plant? Working with retailers to help craft a solution, not just sell a plant, can make a big difference.

Growers supply the plant, but can (and should) work with retailers to make suggestions about potting media that work best for foliage plants, especially ones growing under lower light conditions. Fertilization may arise and certainly should be part of the recommendations a retailer makes. Containers are another key component to success with a foliage plant. Porous terra cotta containers are great choices for many foliage plants, simply because water can evaporate from the container wall, helping to reduce the problem of over-watering in the home environment, especially under lower light conditions.

Consider suggesting that retailers market well-functioning water trays, not just the flimsy plastic that cracks and breaks and leaks all over a consumer's floor. A stained floor from a flimsy protector won't make customers happy. Watering and light levels are so interrelated, professionals need some graphics or verbiage to help explain good watering practices. Your role as a grower should be to develop solutions that retailers can offer consumers, so consumers keep plants watered –but not too much. Crafting point-of-purchase information is another opportunity for a progressive grower to collaborate with retailers. Growers don't necessarily need to make large signs or banners, but why not suggest some of the content to go on signs (and provide it)? Plant names are helpful, but what about a refresher for the light conditions under which the plant will thrive or survive?

Another element of the point-of-purchase information that growers and retailers should include in their communications to market foliage plants are benefits. Hall and Dickson (2011) compiled the research-based evidence for the many benefits that plants bring to human life and the environment. Some of the work they cited included the following information: foliage plants remove indoor pollutants (Yang et al., 2009), and some do that more efficiently than others. According to their research, *Hemigraphis alternata*, *Hedera helix*, *Hoya carnosa*, and *Asparagus densiflorus*, and *Tradescantia pallida* all performed well in pollutant removal. Indoor foliage plants help speed physical recovery (Park and Mattson, 2009 and Raanaas et al., 2010). Other benefits that can be related to indoor foliage plants that Hall and Dickson (2011) cite include: plants helping to improve concentration and memory, generating more positive and relaxing feelings, and reducing stress. More industry professionals should be communicating plant benefits, because who wouldn't want a foliage plant with those benefits?

Positioning foliage

How do consumers use indoor foliage plants? That's not a rhetorical question. When a product has many uses, it has many opportunities to be sold. Sure, foliage plants can decorate the home or office, but how else might a grower position them? Tropical plants have experienced a resurgence of sales outside the home, so why not reposition some indoor foliage plants in the same way? Why not put some inexpensive foliage plants as a vertical element in an outdoor container? They will last longer in southern climates compared to the north, but rethinking how and where we use foliage plants can help stimulate sales.



Growers can play a key role in developing displays by suggesting signage that help highlight plant features.
MICHELLE SIMAKIS

What happens after the sale? Some customers may want coaching to help them keep their plants alive. What support can you offer the retailer to assist them with their customers? What care information do you provide? Can the retailers link to your information so their customers have access to it? Can you provide retailers with some information for newsletters, e-blasts, or social media conversations? As experts in production, growers often have great resources that they might be willing to share. Again, this may help the grower differentiate their business from competitors.

Think creatively about how to position indoor foliage plants, and how to help customers see the benefits beyond the aesthetics. Helping consumers be successful in the home or office will go a long way to creating satisfied, repeat customers.

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