

### Kick-start Your Creativity

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Some people are blessed with creativity, while for others it's in short supply. We asked successful merchandising consultants and retailers about their go-to props, materials and tricks of the trade to turn a ho-hum shelf of random stuff into a can't-pass display of must-haves.

#### Judy Sharpton

*Green Profit* columnist and garden center design specialist with Growing Places Marketing, Savannah, Georgia

"I believe in focusing on how you make it simple and how you make it sell," Judy says.

Sometimes, she says, a staff member can put lots of time and effort into a fabulously attractive display, but the design doesn't facilitate sales. To remedy that, Judy suggests following these principles:

**Have a "signature prop."** This is something that can be part of your signage, exists on the property and can be used repeatedly. "The signature prop I have in mind is the classic old truck that many garden centers have," Judy says. "Those kinds of signature props can be very effective."

**Use architectural elements.** Items such as house fronts, doors, windows, decks and patios offer architectural features that garden centers can use creatively. "If you can take some of these props and use them in more than one place in the store, then it unifies the whole store," Judy points out. She adds that these items should come with a collection of easy-to-apply paint to make it look fresh and seasonal.

**Use containers.** "The very best prop you can have is one that you're going to sell, and that's a container," Judy says. "It gives you color and it allows you to organize the display." Do this two ways—the "big three," e.g. three different sizes of patio containers, and the "perfect pair" of containers.

**Create repeat business.** Judy says if you're using containers and architectural props and are changing your container displays, you're creating repeat business. "That container, window box or hanging wall container is going to sit there and say 'I'm empty and you need to put something in me,'" Judy says. "The garden center can then resell that plant seasonally," she adds. With a shrub display, Judy points out, you sell the shrub just once, but with a container display, you sell those plants more often. "That means putting that container display together is worth more in the long run."

**Judy's must-have display material:** Colored burlap fabric. "You can hang it up, make it look like a festoon, lay it across a table. It's cheap, durable and lends some oomph to a display."

#### Dan Truesdale

*Rolling Green Nursery, Greenland, New Hampshire*

For Dan and the staff at Rolling Green, creativity is just the first step. "It's the execution of those ideas that truly makes a difference," Dan says.

Rolling Green operates by three standards—to inform, to educate, to empower—and these drive how the staff create displays and provide services. "You can create a very powerful, very impactful display using those three standards," he says.

Dan believes it's important to use a story to visually entice the customer through a display. Rolling Green, which has recently been designated as a wildlife conservation area, pulls items from their various departments to tell their customers their birding story—plants, trees, shrubs that provide bird shelter and food, birdbaths, birdhouses and other items. The display tells the story as well as educates the customer.

Empowering the customer is the display's finishing touch. "It's that personal touch," Dan explains. "You create the display and you finish it off with that interaction between the customer and the folks here at Rolling Green."

Signage is what ties together the three display goals of informing, educating and empowering. He applies the concept of “one voice”—a single unifying message—to all of his garden center’s signage. “It’s terribly powerful to have a one-voice style,” Dan stresses. “It’s your most basic link to customers. In order to stand out in this competitive market you need to communicate quickly, effectively.” The resources dedicated to creating signage will certainly pay for itself, he adds.

**Dan’s secret to “sign language”:** “For folks having a hard time trying to find good, colorful language, all you have to do is go into a wine store. Wine signage has the best, most fun, descriptive language. You can just borrow that descriptive language, modify it a little bit.”

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### **Terri Coldreck**

*Garden center design consultant with Color Results, Kennebunk, Maine*

Terri Coldreck knows the horticulture industry is filled with resourceful people and believes it works to their advantage. “In the old barn or Grandpa’s shed, there are old fixtures that vendors have given them or just old, unused items. If you start looking around you’ll be amazed at what you can find,” Terry suggests. Yard sales and second-hand stores are also treasure troves that can yield some display treasures.

**Old furniture.** “If you drive by yard sales on the weekends, they typically put out the free stuff on Sunday afternoons,” Terri says. If you see a ladderback chair or a little table, take it. A can of spray paint can turn a rickety piece of furniture into a colorful item for an endcap. “Say you get your salvias from your grower and they’re not quite open yet,” Terri says. “Spray paint that small table or chair with purple and put it in the endcap display. The purple subliminally tells the customers what color those plants are.”

**Paint.** “It amazes me that people are afraid of paint,” Terri says. People agonize over it, treating it with the permanency of a tattoo. “If you don’t like the color, paint it again,” she suggests. Take that ladder-back chair, for instance: Paint it lavender in spring; red, white and blue in summer, orange in fall. Paint it red and place it among your poinsettias in winter. It’s good for all seasons with a simple change of paint. Terri also applies blackboard paint to different flat-surfaced objects for creative signage options.

**Crates:** “Old apple crates and wooden boxes are the easiest,” Terri says. Use them freestanding, on an endcap, or in the middle of a bench. Old crates help add vertical space, which Terri says this industry is seriously lacking.

**Terri’s trick:** To create an instant table, pair glass table tops or old mirrors with pretty much anything in the garden center—urns, big pots, fountains, birdbaths, even a big pumpkin.

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### **Chris Carter**

*Nobles Greenhouse & Nursery, Live Oak, Florida*

“One of the things we all overlook is that displays mean a lot of different things, and are used in many different ways,” Chris says. “Are we trying to sell one product or a collection of products? Are we trying to show people how to use the products? Or are we just organizing the products in an eye-catching way just to get customers to buy them?”

When showing customers how to use the product, Chris sets up the display just the way the customer would have it at home, such as in a patio, deck or tabletop setting.

Alternately, he also **creates displays that show off the product.** He’ll set up an endcap with six different styles of cobalt blue pottery, for example. “That’s not how the customer will use it. It’s just a nice, big display of pottery and we want to wow them with how many kinds of cobalt blue pottery we have.”

**Go faux.** Chris uses lots of faux foliage. He uses fake grass squares under displays of mushrooms and frogs to kill bench space below. He wraps a rope of faux foliage around an old hutch to soften the corners or to give the jelly display a touch of greenery. For a display of test tube-like rooting jars that just wouldn’t sell, Chris inserted cheap fake flower sprays in them. “They started flying off the shelves,” he says.

**String lights.** Chris wove string lights with fancy pot-like shades through a dark corner containing his terra-cotta products. The suddenly brighter spot attracted shoppers and increased sales of the pots and the string lights. He’s applied this concept to other themed displays, too.

**Old furniture.** Chris enjoys finding old furniture at antique stores and yard sales on his camping vacations, and makes an annual trip over the border to Mexico for inexpensive wrought-iron pieces. He uses these in displays all over the nursery, shuffling around the furniture from one area to the next so the displays are new for customers. He ends up selling much of the furniture, too. “We’ll buy an old table for \$25, put a \$99.99 tag on it. Someone will ask if it’s for sale and I’ll say ‘You’re mighty right it is!’ ” ‘