



Retail Reflection\$

Have You Planted a Display Garden Yet?

by Lane Greer and James L. Gibson

In our move from a service economy to an experience-based economy, more and more consumers want to walk away from a sale feeling that they have experienced something new and different. Display gardens serve this purpose. They help to inspire gardeners, both new and old, with the possibilities of what could be. As a marketing tool, nothing beats display gardens. They are colorful and educational, captivating and informative. A display garden helps to sell plants and other materials by giving homeowners new ideas about plants, hard goods, and garden themes. They allow consumers to see the potential of their home gardens.

In the retail area, most of our attention is focused on selling plants. There is very little thought given to how these plants will perform in the landscape. Display gardens let us see how well the plants establish themselves. We can then knowledgeably answer shoppers' questions on plant vigor and ideal location. Growers can see for themselves how well new introductions survive in sunny or shady environments. Additionally, an on-site display garden can provide information on growth rate and on the appearance of mature plants. The display garden also educates growers on potential pest problems and the effects of microclimates.

We all know that customers are particularly interested in how plants look in bloom. Flowering plants in your display garden will encourage shoppers to try these plants. Fall color is also important to buyers. Seeing large shade trees in full fall color will entice customers much more than would a descriptive paragraph on a plant label.

Good display gardens can provide the grower with lots of information, such as:

- Plant establishment time and ideal location
- Plant vigor
- Time to maturity and what the mature plant looks like
- Bloom time and fall coloration
- Pest problems
- Effects of environment and microclimates
- Selections for next year's young plant order

Why install a display garden?

- Repeat business. People will keep coming back to see what's new in the garden, so be sure to plant spring bulbs as well as summer-blooming perennials and plants with fall interest. All of this translates into year-round sales.
- Sales of accessories, which usually have a higher profit margin than plants. Customers can see how best to use statuary, benches, and ponds in the garden. Also, consider adding landscape lighting if your establishment is open after daylight hours.
- Establish yourself as a gardener, not a mass merchandiser. You're not just a retailer, you're a privately run botanical garden. Prove that you know more about these plants, and that they were grown with the plant in mind. Conversations about plant performance are a great way to break the ice between you and a new customer.
- It provides an area for employees to enjoy their lunch or breaktime in the outdoors.
- Therapy. Anyone who works in retail knows how frustrating it can be. Working in or walking through the display garden can relieve some of this stress.

What are the disadvantages of a display garden?

Maintenance. While a good display garden is a great key to sales, a poorly maintained one will say to your customers that you don't care enough about your plants to keep them looking good, so why should they invest in your plants? Good display gardens are litter-free, weed-free, and well-watered.

The garden will probably require a spring and fall clean-up. A pre-emergent herbicide applied every spring and an irrigation system installed prior to plant placement will help reduce labor requirements. Utilize composted plant materials and potting media from previous growing seasons as an organic amendment. Other maintenance concerns include dividing perennials every few years, keeping deer out of the garden, and replacing trees lost to storms or plants that were poorly matched to their site.

Space. Display gardens should be designed to take advantage of unused areas. In some cases the best areas are at the operation's entrance or around buildings (tool shed, office, breakroom, etc). The garden can be planted around bathroom facilities or in the (often) weedy strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street.

Keep in mind your plans for future expansion. Very extravagant display gardens should not be planted where greenhouses may be built. Another big concern with display gardens is parking. While shoppers are visiting the garden, their cars are occupying the parking lot. At some point, a choice may have to be made between adding more parking or keeping a display garden.

Timing. You're probably saying to yourself, "Yeah, it's a great idea, but who's got the time? Who wants to clean plants in the morning, load carts in the afternoon, fill the truck in the early part of the evening, and then have to think about a display garden?"

Accepting the fact that it will require an extra burst of energy during the most rigorous time of the season is a given. One goal that we established during the writing of this series was to supplement the articles with information on the web. Supporting this article is a website

(<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/floriculture/RR/index.html>) that provides garden templates for four different theme gardens: cut flower, butterfly, fall/winter emphasis and an annual garden designed to perform well in North Carolina's summer climate. These templates will allow you to grab some plants from the greenhouse and install them with relative ease. There are lots of other possibilities, though, like vegetable, bird, bulb, spring, children's, and single species (a garden containing only daylilies, for instance). Please keep in mind that these are only suggestions; the use of color and creativity are necessary for making a great display garden. The website also contains more detailed information about display gardens, as well as several links to cultivar descriptions, as well as pictorial views of landscapes.

Here are five tips to creating a successful display garden.

1. **Build your soil and structures first.** The days of April madness are not the time to plan and establish the foundation for the display garden. During the fall and into the winter, take soil tests and add appropriate amendments first. Work with your local Cooperative Extension Service to determine strategies for improving the soil. Also consider building structures like gazebos, fences, and ponds. Finally, plant your trees, shrubs, and bulbs. In the spring, plant annuals and perennials.
2. **Stick to one theme or idea.** Having trouble moving those aquatic plants? Build a pond! Show how they can be used in a water garden. Decide on the plants or group of plants you want to emphasize. Focus on that theme. If you have several themes you want to push, make several display gardens, rather than trying to lump everything together. It will end up looking muddled.

What are the local themes in your region? Every state or region has a recognizable icon that can serve as the focal point of a garden. You could create a landscape that reflects hometown pride. Ask your employees to sketch out their ideas for a theme garden. In any kind of garden, it is important to add new and unusual annuals every year to produce excitement and anticipation.

3. **Use a backdrop,** even in an island bed. Remember, your aim is to spotlight this garden. For display gardens, the ideal backdrop is usually a row of evergreens, but most nurseries aren't blessed with this. Consider fencing, potted conifers placed behind the bed, or even a steep slope planted in a single crop. For island beds, place tall, expansive plants in the center of the bed and step down the height gradually.
4. **Match plant groupings in the display garden with containerized plants in the sales area.** If your display garden features *Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea* side by side, place your one gallons of *Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea* next to each other on the sales floor. One of the most effective display gardens that we've seen was composed of containerized gallons of daylilies, pink phlox, and veronica in a tiered arrangement.
5. **Avoid running out of featured plants,** especially those in bloom in the display garden. Your silent salesperson will be the plants themselves. On sales signs, use photos of plants in your display garden. This makes the customer feel that he or she is a part of something big; like they had a hand in creating your display garden. You will begin to notice that people

walk through the garden, making lists of plants they want to buy. All of the display plants should be well-labeled. Consider having a leaflet with a plan design. Talk to your “young plant” suppliers to find out if they can provide free promotional literature that can be distributed to consumers.

A good recommendation for new businesses is to start small. In the same way, display gardens may begin as numerous species of containerized plants displayed together. This simple garden may evolve into a large area with several themes, lots of hardscaping, and picnic tables. The amount of time and space available to each grower-retailer will determine the ultimate design and role of the display garden in the retail setting. Whether large or small, display gardens are an essential component in an effective marketing strategy.