

A man with a beard and short brown hair, wearing a dark blue t-shirt, is smiling and looking towards the camera. He is holding a small, round, spiky cactus in a light-colored, textured pot. The background is a dark, wood-paneled wall. In the top right corner, there is a stylized green leaf graphic. The text "# Plant Lovers" is overlaid in large white font across the middle of the image. The man's t-shirt has some text on it, including "Twist" and "Edgy & S".

Plant Lovers

BY MARY WESTBROOK Plants are having a moment. Here's how you can capitalize on it.



The Instagram account @houseplantjournal looks and reads like a millennial plant lover’s dream. There’s a hoya in a tall white planter – a container that Darryl Cheng, the Gen Y mastermind behind the popular account, carted home from a vacation in Hong Kong. Another picture shows a mid-century-esque wooden bookshelf dotted with Sansevieria plants and retro misters. Then there’s a shot of neon green walls, the foreground filled with succulents.

“The jungle vibes make me feel right at home,” Cheng wrote of the shot, taken in the Brooklyn apartment of another plant-obsessed blogger. “Plant nerds unite.” Hashtags for that post (liked by 7,805 people) include #plantsmakepeoplehappy; #plantstagram and #plantparenthood.

One of Cheng’s most far-reaching posts came in February, when he uploaded a seven-second time-lapse video that showed a *Tillandsia tectorum* opening “in sequential fashion” over the course of five hours. The video generated nearly 25,500 views.

You read that correctly: Cheng posted a video of an air plant blooming. His audience, mostly millennials, loved it. (“Wow!”; “Whoa awesome video”; “Que belleza la creación!!!”)

If you haven’t noticed, plants are having a moment, especially among millennials.

On Instagram, hashtags such as #SansevieriaSunday are trending, with users proudly posting shots of their plants clustered in eclectic pots or “posed” in front of funky wallpaper. Search for #plantshelfie and you’ll find more than 7,500 pictures of plants on shelves, clustered on countertops and hanging from ceilings and walls. The posts are highly interactive, and commenters often beg for more info: “Where did you find that container?” “What is that?” “Do nepenthes need lots of light?” We haven’t even mentioned terrariums. Search for those, and you’ll find 128,000 tagged photos on Instagram alone. (Search “terrarium ideas” on Google and you’ll have 700,000-plus results to wade through.)

The movement isn’t confined to social media either. According to the 2016 National Gardening Report, five million of the six million Americans who took up gardening in 2015 were 18 to 34. The same report found that 37 percent of millennials grow plants and herbs indoors, compared to 28 percent of Boomers. Consumers can now pick up brass plant markers (\$50 a pop) from Anthropologie, double plant hangers (\$40) from Urban Outfitters, and all manner of containers on Etsy, from sleek and modern to folksy and quirky. Floral container manufacturers are also following suit, with new lines of on-trend containers that speak to the uptick in consumer interest.

MAKE ‘EM SHINE

Craig Kirchoff, studio assistant and horticulture manager at Twisted Stem in Crystal Lake, Illinois, is the mastermind behind some of the shop’s most eye-catching plant displays, which frequently incorporate unexpected materials, including dried eucalyptus pods and twisted metal.

What's driving the trend? Lots of factors. Compared to previous generations, millennials are buying homes and starting families later in life — nurturing plants instead, apparently. (#plantbabies is another popular hashtag.) Many are choosing to live in cities and urban areas, where rents are high, space is at a premium, and big, green backyards are nonexistent, making a shot of green inside especially welcome. ("Micro apartments" — spaces as small as 200 square feet — are becoming more common and sought after in cities such as Seattle and New York.) Millennials tend to be more attuned to health and environmental concerns than previous generations — "is this organic?" "where was it grown/made?" — and they're more apt to spend money on experiences. Plants tap into those impulses. (A cut flower design, beautiful as it may be, is inherently ephemeral. A plant is a commitment.)

Even if you aren't in a hip city catering to young professionals, though, consumer interest in plants — and, specifically, the kinds of unique plants customers can't pick up for \$5.99 at a hardware or big box store — could be growing in your community, thanks in part to the explosion of plant love on social media and bestselling books, including "Urban Jungle," published last year, which extol the virtues and delights of bringing nature inside. There are signs that older generations are following suit, too: As boomers downsize and declutter, they're also looking for ways to include green spaces in their lives — even a single fiddle-leaf fig in an artful container.



BE SPECIFIC John Regan of Twisted Stem uses Latin nomenclature to ID plants in his store, and he's trained his staff to do the same.



UPSELL POTENTIAL The team at Twisted Stem adds extra design interest (and increases average transactions) by adding unexpected "accessories" and decorative flair to plant designs.

The Pantone Institute named Greenery its 2017 Color of the Year for a reason.

And, consumers who are into plants are often *really* into plants. That's good news for florists who take the time to build a robust plant program (rather than thinking of plant sections as an afterthought or obligatory corner of the retail showroom). These "new" plant lovers want detailed information on plants and their care. They want to trick out their containers and add some real personality — often with a serious dash of nostalgia (macramé hangers are baaaack). They want to play a hands-on role in designing those terrariums, and they consider plant purchases to be décor investments, integral parts of their design aesthetic. Finally — consider the potential: For many of these customers, a space simply can't have too many plants.

The key to turning these plant fans into customers? Engage them, educate them and give them lots of options, say florists who have built a loyal plant-loving following. This month, we turned to three florists in Michigan, cutting-edge shops

in the Heartland, not necessarily major cities, for tips on how to think about these buyers, ways to entice them and advice on how to get them into your store.

Plant Priority: Become the expert. Sell the unexpected.

First a truism: Customers looking for a hanging pothos or a philodendron are likely to head to a big box store for those purchases. That's why, particularly with plants, it's important to find the right suppliers and commit to educating yourself and your team on your unusual offerings.

In Crystal Lake, Illinois, John Regan and his plant manager at Twisted Stem travel around the Midwest to personally inspect plants before purchase — when they buy from someone farther afield or when they don't have the time to drive to a location, they've been known to ask a grower or wholesaler to take part in a Skype video call, so they can at least get a visual on the plants.

"This is especially true when I'm dealing with a new vendor and I'm inspecting for any pathogens or pests,"

said Regan, who has an undergraduate degree in ornamental horticulture. "Bringing troubled plants into the shop results in a much bigger problem," one that puts other plants in-store at risk.

Regan's 1,150-square-foot shop is located a few driveways down from another florist with a 28-acre greenhouse and nursery, so he can't afford to stock the "same old-same old." Instead, he shoots for "edgy" plants — old-growth specimen plants, woodland ferns and exotic orchids are popular now. Because customers can't find them just anywhere they command a higher price.

Back at the store, Regan takes education seriously. He gets frustrated when suppliers have incomplete name information or (worse) rely only on common names, which can vary by region.

"When I'm looking for a collection of cacti or succulents, I'm looking for six or seven varieties," he said. "That shortens my vendor list. I'm looking for people who share that passion and attention to detail. [The specificity] can frustrate some vendors."

He also trains his staff to use botanical names and all in-store signage includes Latin nomenclature.

"It's simple for the staff because they've learned the names from me and it's frequently the only name they know," Regan said. "The best way to train staff is to know and use it from the top down."

For some florists, delving deeper into plants can be a humbling experience.

Derek Woodruff, AIFD, CF, PFCI, had already earned a reputation as a top floral designer in 2014 when he joined the team at Darling Botanical Co. in Traverse City, Michigan, as the cut flower manager. The store, owned by Megan Kellogg, generates about 70 percent of sales from plants and has a 1,000-square-foot DIY terrarium bar — and Woodruff quickly realized he had lots to learn.

"I entered this job thinking I knew a lot about plants based on my background in floral design," he said. "I realized very quickly that I didn't. Plants aren't just amenities" — or afterthoughts to consider once a florist has his cut flower department in order.

Woodruff spent his early days at the shop getting his hands dirty at the terrarium bar, re-learning and in some cases

learning about different plant materials, under the tutelage of Kellogg.

"What I realized is that you can't learn everything out of a book, which is how I initially learned about plants," he said. "There are many outside factors that come into play, such as light within spaces, humidity within spaces, acclimation, consistency and adaptation. The real way to learn to care for plants is hands-on experience."

Having a strong plant business also means staying on top of trends in containers, and finding goods that will surprise and delight trendy customers.

For example, "terra cotta is super-hot right now," Woodruff said. "It can be a traditional terra cotta or something that's more weathered and falling apart. Anything with clean lines is also big, along with gray and modern-looking cubes and troughs."

In Wayne, Michigan, Laura Daluga, AIFD, sources many containers for her business, Department of Floristry, from ceramic companies based in Michigan — they can be more expensive but she presents them to her customers as one-of-a-kind finds with a local connection (a marketing message that appeals to millennials). (Daluga,

design director at Smithers-Oasis, also works part-time at Keller and Stein Florist in Canton, Michigan.)

"We have found that when it comes to Michigan-made products, be they cards, containers or locally-grown flowers, consumers really do get excited when it's made in their backyard," she said, noting that her hard goods markup is 2.5 times, including for more expensive local finds. "Local pride is a very real thing, and consumers are generally looking for products that reflect them, their identity and their outlook."

Daluga also is a fan of Etsy's wholesale platform, which she says has been a consistently good source for unusual finds.

"Often times I'll find a really cool, locally produced geometric planter on Etsy Wholesale," she said. "That platform is really great for sourcing totally unique, locally handcrafted giftware."

Plant Priority: Create Insta-Worthy Displays

If you want to attract millennial plant buyers, the days of putting a few plants on a table are gone. Young buyers are looking for inspiration — they want to imagine their purchase in their home



ONE OF A KIND At Twisted Stem, John Regan video conferences with suppliers to get a visual on a plant when sourcing some of his unique finds, which he pairs with containers customers can't find at Home Depot.

OMG. WHAT IS THAT???



BEST SELLERS Some of the top-selling plants for florists featured this month include: **1** succulents **2** echeveria **3** streptocarpus **4** ficus lyrata **5** paphiopedilum **6** tillandsia **7** Venus fly trap **8** string of pearls (*Senecio rowleyanus*) **9** bromeliad

OK, so plants in plastic containers and generic baskets aren't going to make customers stop and gawk — what will? We asked our florist sources to share what's hot right now in their plant departments, when it comes to both plants and plant accessories and tools (hello, add-on sales!).

John Regan of Twisted Stem in Crystal Lake, Illinois, said his customers tend to be looking for plants that are sturdy (evoking the feeling of permanence) or plants that have exotic blossoms. Top-sellers lately include **echeveria**, funky varieties of **sanseveria**, **ficus lyrata**, imported **streptocarpus** and **paphiopedilum**. The shop also carries several styles and sizes of **glass cloches**.

"We've started to carry some larger **quartz crystal chunks** and **geodes** that add a bit of character to planted gardens, as well as funkier items like **dried banksia pods**, **oyster shells** with **partially formed pearls** and **lots of contorted driftwood pieces**," he said.

Succulents are tops at Darling Botanical Co. in Traverse City, Michigan, said Derek Woodruff, AIFD, CF, PFCI, and at Department of Floristry in Wayne, Michigan, according to Laura Daluga, AIFD.

"We sell trays and trays of them each week, mostly for table-top planters and terrariums," Woodruff said. "They're very attractive and easy to care for. A larger-sized plant that we sell a lot of is the **fiddle-leaf fig**. This is a very popular plant with millennials as it takes up a lot of air space and is very easy to care for."

Daluga also pointed to **bromeliads**, **orchids**, **tillandsia** and **string of pearls** (*Senecio rowleyanus*) as strong performers. Another popular selection at Darling Botanical Co.? **Mounted staghorn ferns**.

"These ferns are mounted to a slab of wood to mimic the way they grow in nature," Woodruff said. "It's a unique way to style a vertical surface with plant material."

Accessories you'll find at the shop? Primarily goods customers can't pick up at big boxes, Woodruff said, adding that popular items now include large **watering cans**, **terrarium tools** and **soil probes** (used to check moisture levels on larger potted plants).

Get additional tips on new plants to source, straight from a grower on the cutting edge at safnow.org/moreonline. —**M.W.**

(and on their social media sites), and your visual merchandising should reflect that aspirational tone.

Often, that means mixing things up. About a year ago, for instance, Regan turned to a plant display at Twisted Stem and felt a little, well, ho-hum. The plants looked beautiful and healthy but not particularly exciting. He charged Craig Kirchoff, his studio assistant and horticulture manager, with refreshing the display. "Do something avant-garde," he suggested.

The next morning, Regan walked in to find the plants encircled by twisted metal and bent rods. It was modern and cool, and Regan loved it. His customers did, too. Before Regan had time to snap a photo, three plants had been sold.

Today, Kirchoff, is the mastermind behind many of the most creative flourishes to plant displays in the store; he's been known to pick up fruit tree limbs outside or to dry eucalyptus pods to add some flair to plant displays.

"Plants don't go out on our floor in baskets," Regan said. "The less it looks like a 'grocery store plant,' the better. Our tagline is 'edgy and elegant,' and a funky look is what often draws our customers in. If a display feels predictable, we change it up."

When considering your displays for plants, embrace a little nostalgia, suggested both Regan and Daluga, who note that the '70s and '80s are back in a big way. With plants, that translates to rattan plant stands and macramé hangers.

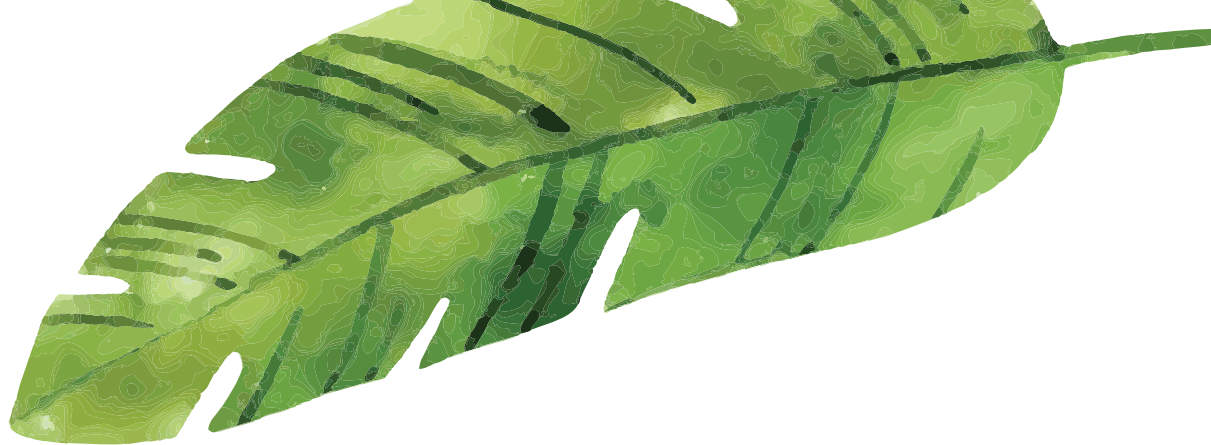
As you set up your plant area, remember, too, to take care and handling into account, especially when it comes to light levels. When Kellogg moved Darling Botanical Co. into the larger location in 2014, she chose the space in part because the window placement would facilitate optimal lighting for plant areas. (See "Quality," p. 48).

Plant Priority: Pitch the Experience

One of the most popular areas at Darling Botanical Co. is that 1,000-square-foot DIY terrarium bar, where customers can choose from an assortment of containers, mediums (soil, drainage stones, etc.), decorative materials and plants. The bar has become a popular stop for everyday customers and people



WHAT'S OLD IS NEW Plant love is ushering in a renewed interest of materials common in the '70s and '80s. Macramé hangers are baaack. "That makes my hippie florist mom's heart so happy," said Laura Daluga, of Department of Floristry and Keller and Stein Florist, both in Michigan.



PLANT POWER ON THE JOB

Millennials and Boomers may be filling their (tiny) homes with plants, but did you know that university research proves that flowers and plants can also make a workplace more productive? More important, do your customers know that?

In 2003, the Society of American Florists partnered with an internationally recognized research team at Texas A&M University to learn how flowers and plants in the workplace impact productivity and problem solving. Among other results, the study found that:

- Problem-solving skills, idea generation and creative performance improve substantially in workplace environments that include flowers and plants.
- Specifically, both men and women who work in environments with flowers and plants demonstrate more innovative thinking as compared to environments with sculpture or no decorative objects.
- Men who participated in the study generated 30 percent more ideas

when working in environments with flowers and plants than ones without.

- While men generate a greater abundance of ideas, the research shows that women generate more creative, flexible solutions to problems in workplace environments with flowers and plants.

Find out more about this study and other SAF research at safnow.org/trends-statistics/consumer-research. —M.W.



“As an industry, we’ve got to get over any anxiety around selling unfinished designs, or just the raw elements to them,” said Laura Daluga, AIFD, who advocates florists allow for some DIY (or DIY-ish) areas, particularly with plants.

looking for a special occasion — parties or mother-daughter outings. (See “Snapshot,” p. 12., for more.)

The bar has always been central to Kellogg’s business plan; when she moved the business to a new location in 2014, she knew she wanted space for the area. Today, the shop hosts weekly workshops at the bar, drawing in a diverse crowd of customers (bachelorette parties are a popular group to take advantage of the space — and, when the weather is gloomy, the bar is often hopping.)

A big part of the appeal: “It’s an experience, and that’s really what’s driving a lot of purchases among millennials and, frankly, customers of all demographics,” said Woodruff.

Beyond the terrarium bar, the shop capitalizes on customers’ desire to spend money on experiences by giving them the chance to buy everything à la carte — the container, the plant, and any accessories.

“It gives customers a feeling of ownership,” Woodruff said. “The like to feel like they’re creating the purchase.”

Daluga has seen a similar trend among her customers.

“It’s really about the experience,” she said, pointing to the explosion of companies that specialize in group events such as paint and wine nights. “I don’t see that changing anytime soon, and there’s no reason florists can’t capitalize on it.”

At Twisted Stem, clients frequently bring in their own containers. From there, Kirchoff helps them determine the right plant match by asking about light and humidity levels and the general level of care a customer wants to provide.

“We do offer in-house workshops including a friendly lecture and demonstration, always followed up with a handout to take home with the planted creation,” Regan added.

Daluga said involving the customer in the process of creating the final product is a big deal — something that’s important to customers, even if some florists shy away from the concept. (If I set up a terrarium bar, they wonder, won’t that give away my “secrets” and hurt future sales?) While customers still need plenty

of guidance, labor surrounding these sales can be low, and hands-on activities generate sales florists might otherwise lose out on.

"Many florists already have a corsage bar and a bouquet bar, why not a terrarium bar?" she said. "As an industry, we've got to get over any anxiety around selling unfinished designs, or just the raw elements to them. We know the joy of flowers and plants, let's spread that love. [The experience] will only build greater appreciation [for what we do] with our customers."

Plant Priority: Consider the Customer

Because they see the purchase as an investment, customers who buy a plant can require a little more hand-holding than cut flower buyers.

"People come in and the first thing they say is, 'I want something easy to care for,'" said Woodruff. "Some customers do have a little anxiety — 'I have a black thumb' — and they think of plants as a big commitment."

For that reason, selling a customer a plant is often about finding her the right plant, and that can require lifestyle and caretaking questions that might not be in your sales team's normal line-up for flower sales: What kind of light does the room get? Do you have a pet? Are you a "nurturer" (and prone perhaps to over-watering)?



SARAH BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY

MANY HANDS The terrarium bar at Darling Botanical Co. in Traverse City, Michigan, speaks to consumers' desire to invest in experiences.

BIG PLANT NEWS ON TINY HOMES

Ready to jump start or re-energize your plant department? You can learn more about some of the top trends discussed in this story and much more firsthand from Derek Woodruff, AIFD, CF, PFCI, during the Society of American Florists' 1-Day Profit Blast, July 22, at the Renaissance St. Louis Airport Hotel in St. Louis.

In this hands-on design presentation, sponsored by Syndicate Sales, Woodruff will share strategies to connect with customers who are downsizing (or choosing tiny homes to begin with).

You'll learn:

- How to create chic designs perfect for small spaces
- Movements in indoor gardening that you can leverage
- How to set up a terrarium bar in your shop

SAF's 1-Day Profit Blast, underwritten by Baisch and Skinner Wholesale and DWF Wholesale,, also includes sessions on finding hidden profits, best practices in social media and practical tips to improve customer service, along with a Supplier Showcase and Networking Lunch, sponsored by Hortica.

Find out more and register today at safnow.org/events.

It's also about dispelling the myth that all plants are hard, as Woodruff notes. "Sometimes, people over think it. I tell them 'Look if this plant in your terrarium dies after six months, you've had it for six months! Pop it out and replace it.'"

A tip from Daluga? You can't repeat care info enough to customers.

"Care and handling is best communicated in stereo, on repeat," she said. "I try and glean as much info as I can from a customer in terms of the environment the plant will be living in. What's the light situation? How about humidity? From there I can best explain the plant's needs, as they rely heavily on environment. For example, tillandsia placed in the shower will fare well, needing direct watering only sporadically. In addition to these in-person notes, we include some general care tips and we remind customers, 'We are always happy to help! Just give us a ring.'"



SARAH BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY



At Twisted Stem, Regan likens the process of buying a plant to buying a pet: You need to find the right fit. Like Daluga, his shop also provides a high level of service post-purchase. Every plant the shop sells includes a code on a sticker attached to the bottom of its container. If a customer runs into trouble with the plant once she's taken it home, she can call the shop and a staff member can use the code to look up a detailed history of that plant — where it was grown, special considerations, when it was purchased and more. By having the customer call in, or even sending a staff member to her house, Regan can also ensure that plants with diseases or pests aren't brought back into the store, where they could put other plants at risk. 🌿

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