



MELISSA RICH

Houseplants are having a moment.

Here's how to get
in on the green.

Growth Mindset

BY AMANDA LONG

When her retail location was forced to shut down at the beginning of the pandemic, Jackie Levine brought her houseplants to the people, via Instagram stories. The shop's must-see IG content was a critical lifeline to the customers of Central Square Florist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, especially the weekly (and sometimes twice weekly) arrival of plants broadcast by Levine, stoking interest and demand for specific plants for which the stuck-at-home crowd pined. When Central Square Florist reopened its doors in June, Levine, the shop's vice president and a member of its third generation, learned how strong a magnet her plants had become. "I've had customers buy an entire box as they come off the truck before we even get them on the shelves," she said. "People are crazy for them." Crazy enough to push Central Square's plant sales up 25 percent this year.

Got plants? You'd better. As retail florists around the country will tell you, this latest plant craze isn't a fleeting phase. Consumers — especially those in their 20s and 30s — were proclaiming themselves "plant parents" and following "plantfluencers" online before the pandemic, but their appreciation for that touch of nature inside has only grown (and grown and grown) since March 2020. "Plant love is here to stay — people are obsessed," said Nicole Palazzo, executive vice president at City Line Florist in Trumbull, Connecticut, where plant sales were up 20 percent in 2020, compared to 2019. "There's a whole generation of plant-loving consumers who are filling their homes with plants. It's just part of the culture now."

In so many ways, catering to the plant-obsessed is an obvious fit for retail florists, but plenty of hurdles exist. Competition is fierce — from other florists and garden centers, home improvement chains and mass marketers, online companies, and especially in metro and suburban areas, plant boutiques. Intimidation is real — just because you know cut flowers doesn't mean you and your team are plant pros. And the supply chain at best is a new riddle to solve for already time-crunched owners and managers. Then there's merchandising, selling online, marketing — on and on.

And yet... The ROI of introducing plants effectively or upping your plant game this year could be a strong revenue stream at a time when staples such as event and corporate work remain in flux, if not entirely on hold. Plants are everyday, versatile purchases: People buy them as gifts and self-purchases like crazy. Plus, once a consumer discovers her green thumb, she's likely to add to her collection of "plant babies" with more plants and accessories. There's no reason you can't become a go-to source for more of the plant-loving crowd in your area. We asked four florists, of varying size and location across the county, how they're mining the green rush — and how you can, too.

GROWING FAMILY Lori Wheat, AAF, Tanner Wheat, and Brian Wheat, AAF, PFCI, have seen an uptick in interest for indoor plants.

READY TO GROW ON?

Find additional insight from all of the florists featured in this story along with exciting details about SAF's Great Big Plant Event launching this March at safnow.org.

The Local Plantfluencer

Central Square Florist | Cambridge, Massachusetts

Space: One 1,800-square-foot retail flower shop in an urban area.

Growth Spurt: Indoor plant sales up 25 percent (2020 vs. 2019).

Team: 15 full-time and five part-time employees. VP Jackie Levine is the main plant buyer.

Plant Path

At Central Square Florist, Levine has taken a key lesson of 2020 — if you want to sell something, make sure it's on your website for online shopping — and applied it to plants. Starting in 2020, Levine put every plant for sale on the shop's GravityFree website, organized in three sections (Flowering Plants, Green Plants and Commercial Office and Floor Plants) with straightforward descriptions (plant info, dimension, container info), pretty photos and lots of add-on options (chocolates, plush) to make both gifting and self-purchase easy-breezy for customers. Plus, she and her team make sure their plant love (and plant products and services) are front and center across their robust social media pages, including LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. Something Levine has focused on in particular: broadening plant assortment to set the shop apart from national retailers and grocery stores. "Have plants they won't find elsewhere," she advised. Some of the shop's most popular plants in recent months include monstera, calathea, ponytail palm, alocasia and hanging burros tail.

Seeding Social Media

Krispy Kreme has its "Hot Now" window light (and genius "Hot Light" app) and Central Square Florist has Instagram Live, which Levine uses like a bat signal to alert customers to new plant shipments. As soon as plants arrive at the shop (on Mondays and occasionally Thursdays), Levine takes to Instagram Stories to highlight new options. The Central Square team pairs the live action footage with photos and plant info,

including size and care and handling advice, along with interesting details about the plant. If they skimp on that info, customers let them know in the comments — a sign of just how engaged this micro community of plant fans can be. "Our customers totally and completely 'watch' for new plant shipments, and we definitely try to educate as much as possible while still showing off as much product as we can," Levine said.

Driving Foot Traffic

Central Square also focuses on the in-store plant experience. In March 2020 — right as "the world shut down," Levine said — the team finalized a major reorganization of the entire shop. With the help of The Little Details, a local firm that specializes in commercial and residential organization projects, the shop added a new sales counter, reimagined supply and work spaces, created more usable storage real estate in the base-



Jackie Levine

ment, and engineered an easier-to-shop, 300-square-foot plant section, complete with streamlined, wooden fixtures. The goal was to give each plant more space to shine and make the shopping experience more customer-friendly, with clear labels that include easy-to-follow care instructions for the plant-curious, and perhaps, slightly plant-wary buyer. The team also strategically repositioned their plants, moving them off the ground and closer to shoppers' eye level — "Nobody looks at the ground," Levine said. And they now purposefully show off higher-end ceramic containers and pots with a more modern aesthetic, a move that helps bolster the shop's reputation as a local source for discerning plant enthusiasts.

Choosing Containers

When Levine sees clean, white containers (in any material) in stock, she scoops them up, as that shade seems to be the most popular for the minimalist-minded crowd. However, because Central Square's customer demographic is varied in age and income, she also tries to keep "a little bit of everything" on hand, so the grad student can outfit her apartment dorm with a whimsical polka-dot pot, the remote office crowd can accent their Zoom background with a simple black square vessel, and the urban retiree can take home a ceramic pot that gives off a homey but sophisticated vibe. Supply-chain uncertainties also shrank the supply and variety of containers, Levine said, echoing the observation of many florists. Her advice: If you see a container you like, buy it. You'll find use for it soon enough.



BREAKING NEWS Jackie Levine takes to Instagram Live to announce the arrival of new plants.

The Seasoned Pros

Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop & Garden Center | Lafayette, Colorado

Space: Flower shop and garden center in a suburban setting. 15,000 square feet of space total: 5,000-square-foot retail showroom; 5,000-square-foot newly redesigned greenhouse; 5,000-square-foot outdoor garden market.

Growth Spurt: Green plant sales are up 27.5 percent (2020 vs. 2019), with double- and even triple-digit increases in adjacent categories, including succulents, orchids and pottery/saucers.

Team: Six full-time employees in management roles and 13.5 full-time equivalent team members year round. Garden Center Manager (and fourth-generation family member) Tanner Wheat runs the houseplant and garden departments, with assistance from his dad, CEO Brian Wheat, AAF, PFCI.

Plant Path

First things first: Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop & Garden Center knows plants. Founded more than 70 years ago, the family business has long been a trusted source for plant and gardening devotees in the region, but consumers' love for houseplants in particular has given new life to many of the longtime business's marketing and sales efforts. "The popularity of houseplants came just when we needed to find a way to attract new customers," said co-owner Lori Wheat, AAF. Those are key customers the venerable business has focused on as they rethought their plant strategies in recent years, and especially during the last year. "These new customers are looking for something for themselves: plants that they can nurture," Lori said.

Driving Foot Traffic

Lafayette has always been a business where customers come and linger, but with a revamped greenhouse area, unveiled in January 2020, the Wheats hoped to capitalize on consumers' growing appetite for all things houseplants AND all things experience based. (Think: twenty- and thirtysomethings strolling

through the greenhouse with dogs and strollers.) Through the \$50,000 project, they demolished features that weren't driving sales to give more square footage to their expanding roster of trendy plants. They incorporated new displays, widened walkways and added customer-friendly features. (Read more about the redesign effort on p. 12.)

Prioritizing Online Sales

The timing of the greenhouse reveal — less than two months before Colorado's March 26 statewide stay-at-home order was issued — may not have seemed ideal to the Wheats initially, but some of the changes they made to the physical space also have helped ensure employee and customer safety during the crisis. "Little did we know that [many of these changes] would help us in the pandemic — making aisles wider and easier to see other shoppers approaching," Lori said. The improved organization of their physical space also gave the team a leg up at the start of the pandemic when they created a virtual plant showroom on their website. The page is consumer focused, with plants organized by customer needs and desires; categories include "Floor Plants," "Tabletop Plants" and "Plants with Patterns." Without the addition of the virtual showroom, selling plants for curbside pickup throughout 2020 would have been more challenging, Lori said, and the info-packed page, which includes photos and concise write-ups for each plant, helps educate customers and streamlines the buying experience overall.

Seeding Social Media

Tanner is a regular on the shop's Instagram and Facebook feeds, showing off his new plant finds. Like Levine, Tanner posts when a new shipment arrives, to generate excitement, but he also jumps online to alert customers to limited availability of a seasonal item, which helps create a sense of urgency. The Lafayette team often positions plants as an antidote



MELISSA RICH

LOOKIN' GOOD Redesigned spaces have put the spotlight on indoor plants at Lafayette Florist, Gift Shop & Garden Center.

to loneliness for the cabin-fevered crowd, with Tanner drawing inspiration and ideas from trending pop culture items and his coworkers' lives. Humor is highly encouraged. The personality-filled strategy is paying off in sales results and also in key social media metrics: Tanner said plant posts generate more engagement than any other category.

Getting the Green

Lafayette Florist sources most of its plants locally. Orchids — a popular option for customers looking for a high-end, long-lasting option — come from a grower down the street. Houseplants come from a local plant wholesaler who specializes in indoor plants. "Tanner has built a solid relationship with this vendor, who takes good care of us," Lori said. "We found that limiting our vendors have allowed us to create very strong relationships giving us better terms, discounts and availability." Her advice to florists having trouble finding plants is to be flexible. For example, when Tanner had trouble sourcing smaller plants, he brought in a selection of "huge" Monstera (think: 6-foot diameter). Lori was skeptical, but they've sold well: That monster of a monstera is now one of the shop's go-to floor plants.

The Suburban Oasis

City Line Florist | Trumbull, Connecticut

Space: One 4,545-square-foot retail flower shop plus a 2,800-square-foot greenhouse.

Growth Spurt: Indoor plant sales are up almost 20 percent (2020 vs. 2019).

Team: Seven full-time and 18 part-time employees year round. Owners Sue Palazzo and Carl Roehrich II are the main plant buyers.

Plant Path

At City Line, plant sales “skyrocketed” in 2020, and Nicole Palazzo, manager of product development and marketing, and a founder of the Society of American Florists’ Next Gen group. “100 percent” attributes the spike to COVID-19. Increased interest in houseplants for the shop started at Easter — a phenomenon SAF saw play out across the country last spring, based on feedback to retailer member surveys. Since then, that interest has kept growing for Palazzo and team, nurtured and tended to by City Line’s plant-centric approaches on social media, along with its eye-catching outdoor displays and a staff ready to assist customers who need some handholding.

Driving Foot Traffic

Like so many quick-thinking, space-needing restaurateurs, City Line looked to its parking lot during the

warmer months of the pandemic, when the team needed more space to allow for physical distancing. They filled the lot with plant displays (not only indoor, houseplant options but also outdoor garden selections, including perennials and patio pots) and created a vibrant scene. The approach made curbside pickups easier and allowed staff to help more customers outside. What started as a necessary quick fix also turned out to be an irresistible pull for local plant lovers, and a strategy the team maintained through the early fall. “We’re in a residential area, yet sandwiched between two major highways, so we have a great deal of traffic passing by,” said Palazzo. “We truly believe [the parking-lot displays generated] impulse buys” — and many of the customers attracted to the bright, outdoor displays were first-time buyers. Now that it’s winter in Connecticut, the parking lot is less functional as a plant sales space; however, the team has started incorporating more houseplants into its gift shop displays to create a lush vibe — and one that reminds customers how versatile plants can be in any indoor space.

Seeding Social Media

Palazzo also worked the realities of cold weather living during a pandemic into



Nicole Palazzo

her marketing tactics on social media. Throughout 2020, she ran frequent virtual plant sales via Instagram Stories that translated to real-time sales. In each, Palazzo featured about 10 plants with a quick pitch aimed at providing followers with basic plant info. Every Story led to a sold-out inventory of the featured products. Not able to create or maintain an entire plant section on your site? Take a page from Palazzo: The plant-focused content on City Line’s social media is vital to sales for the shop since its website doesn’t mirror the “huge variety” of plants available in person. Social media acts as backup, letting customers know real-time inventory and pushing more plants to the people.

Choosing Containers

“What sets City Line apart are our containers,” Palazzo said. The shop stopped putting plants out in run-of-the-mill plastic containers and instead uses ceramic options — and each plant gets a dedicated container that speaks to its aesthetic and personality. “You want people to be able to envision it in their home,” she said. That doesn’t mean you have to become a Crate and Barrel merchandiser; it just means you pay attention to plant and container pairings and have a variety, from whimsical (giraffes and unicorns) to trendy (lush jungle) to timeless (simple ceramic). In addition to upping perceived value and retail price, containers also represent a chance to work in care-and-handling information to customers and position yourself as an expert. “People always want to get a fancy container, which is great, but the biggest mistake is not having drainage on the container for the water,” Palazzo said.



SPACE SAVERS The City Line team used their parking lot as overflow (and pandemic-appropriate) plant sales space in 2020.

The Green Décor Go-To

Lake Forest Flowers | Lake Forest, Illinois

Space: One 2,700-square-foot shop in a suburban location, and room outside for specialty outdoor plants during the spring, summer and fall months.

Growth Spurt: Indoor plants sales have increased 154 percent (2020 vs. 2019).

Team: Vice President Eileen Weber, AAF, and her father, John Looby, AAF, are the shop's two full-time employees, who work alongside six part-time staff. Both are horticulturists.

Plant Path

For the Lake Forest team, the pandemic provided new opportunities to get into customers' homes (in safe, socially distanced ways) to help clients incorporate more plants into their décor. "Plants are filling this void that the pandemic created — people aren't traveling, they're not shopping, they're not seeing their friends as much, so they're filling their homes with plants," said Weber. "People are telling me that they're cheaper than furniture. They like the air-purifying aspect and there's just something about watching them bloom and grow."

Inspired Interiors

Weber also credits the availability of a wider variety of interesting, rare plants (e.g., *Monstera adansonii* and *Soleirolia soleirolii*) as a reason for the shop's increased houseplant sales, coupled with clients seeing those gorgeous greens all over social media and in shelter magazines. That interest led her to carry air plants for the first time, a popular seller, and lean into marketing plants as home décor. In early April, Weber started fielding more calls from customers for large-scale houseplant installations, assignments that build on both her interior design chops and her horticulturist training. By the end of 2020, she'd done at least 10, with one client filling her home with 20 new green friends. The uptick in orders for large-scale plants led Weber to open trade accounts with more vendors, sourcing

containers for the large plants and even supplying plant care and maintenance services for the indoor plants. (She charges by the hour for plant care and pest management.)

Getting the Green

Weber tends to source plants through her partner wholesalers and brokers, but she also turns to smaller local greenhouses and growers. She's had to adapt during COVID; one of her favorite greenhouses closed its wholesale business during the pandemic, taking with them the "lush, full plants with unique colors" Weber had long relied on and forcing her to find alternatives. "My suggestion is to start small," she said, to florists moving more deeply into plants. "Usually, you have to purchase in larger quantities, but you can request a mix of varieties. Be sure you know how to care for the plants properly. Watering can be a huge issue. You don't want to bring on plants that you can't maintain until they sell."

Choosing Containers

Finding the right pots at the right quantity with enough of a wow factor has been harder than sourcing new plants for Weber. Supply-chain disruptions and



John Looby, AAF, and Eileen Weber, AAF

increased demand have sent her sourcing beyond the wholesaler, especially for large-scale plants. For some hard-to-find sizes, she partnered with a local garden center and through social marketing they promote the concept of "community partnerships" which customers love seeing. As she's often sourcing "a specific pot for a specific room with a specific aesthetic," Weber will shop at the same furniture stores as her customers, such as Restoration Hardware, Terrain and Design within Reach. "You can't just put any plant in any pot, but often customers are focused on the color of pot and not how its shape works with the shape/size of the plant," she said. "That's my job: to find the right match, and make sure it works in their home while giving the plant a healthy life to live." 🌿

Amanda Long is a contributing writer and former managing editor of *Floral Management*.



GREEN GLAM Lake Forest Flowers helps customers pair their interior design aspirations with indoor plants.

PLANT

Persuaders

The plant passions that drive two plantfluencers — and why they matter to your business.

BY MARY WESTBROOK

Along with “social distancing” and “flattening the curve,” the word “plantfluencer” was a word that entered more Americans’ vocabulary in 2020. As people hunkered down and looked for ways to draw comfort and combat feelings of isolation during the pandemic, many turned to houseplants. And to decide what to buy, how to style plants, how to incorporate them into home décor, they looked increasingly to the vibrant, dynamic communities of plant lovers of Instagram. The plantfluencers racking up remarkable followings online have diverse backgrounds and highly personal stories about the connections they feel to plants, but their messages — that plants make people feel happier and that plants are a meaningful addition to any (and every) space year round — are rallying cries for everyone in the floral industry invested in growing plant sales far beyond the pandemic period. Floral Management recently talked with two plantfluencers about their experience in the online communities and their deep, abiding passion for all things green.

COURTESY STACEY BAL

BlackPlantChick.com

THE PLANT EVANGELIST

Alika Turner

Pen Name:
Jade Harper

Instagram Handle: @blackplantchick
Instagram Followers: 18,700+

Beyond Social: Turner hosts the popular Black Plant Chick Podcast, which debuts its second season in January. She also offers plant care workshops and consultations via her website.

Floral Management: When did you become interested in plants in a big way?

Alika Turner: I am a creative and my background is in erotic storytelling — books, podcasting and videos. I hit a point in my life when I needed to pivot into something new. Around that time, I was setting up a scene for a video and I thought, “I need a pop of color — something green and alive.” I went to a big box store in Atlanta and picked up an umbrella tree and a corn plant. They looked great — at first. Then, they started looking sad. My home office only has one little window. I didn’t know how to take care of these plants. So, I started educating myself. I began posting about my plants on social media. It was an outlet for me, initially, but soon I was part of this big plant community. It’s all grown from that. At one point in the pandemic, I had 60, 70 plants in my house. I was going to a local nursery every weekend, buying three or four plants at a time. It was a place that made me feel safe.



“Find the community that speaks your language. The online plant community is big! It’s OK to jump from community to community, especially as you are learning.”

—Alika Turner

FM: How did you find your place within the many plant communities online?

AT: I started The Black Plant Chick podcast because I understood that medium, podcasting, and I thought it would be a way to talk about my journey becoming a plant parent. But it was also an opportunity for me to invite guests on and talk to people who speak my plant language. That’s something I preach all the time to people who are new to plants: Find the community that speaks your language. The online plant community IS big! It’s

OK to jump from community to community, especially as you are learning.

One thing that was shocking to me in the online plant community was seeing how many people who looked like me were thriving there. Every day, I see all of these beautiful people of color with their beautiful plants, all through my social media feed — people like Veronica Moore of Brown Skinned Plant Mama (@brownskinnedplantmama), who’s like my resident therapist, and Colah B Tawkin of Black in the Garden

(@blackinthegarden), who I consider my “soil sister,” and so many others. It is very important for me as a Black woman to keep pushing my voice so that other people of color know they are welcome in this space, too. Representation matters.

FM: How does your experience with storytelling inform your love of plants — or vice versa?

AT: For me, the podcast is just one more way to connect plants and storytelling — two things I’m very passionate about. There’s a lot of overlap. Plants need more than water and food to survive. So do people! On my podcast, talking about how I was feeling a little low and then how caring for my fiddle-leaf fern helped lift me up — that can all be a very natural progression. I’ve found that giving and receiving plants can really be a spiritual connection, too. Now that I’ve experienced how much work it takes to care for double-digit numbers of plants, I understand the energy transfer that’s happening when you give a plant to someone else — the love and care you put into keeping that plant alive, helping it thrive, all of that is still there and it’s going along to that new person, which is pretty powerful to think about. It’s a very dynamic experience.



COURTESY ALIKA TURNER

CARE TAKERS Plantfluencer Alika Turner said plants help many people express and share emotions with others.

FM: What do you think more plant enthusiasts need more of right now from the people who are growing and selling plants?

AT: Education! So many people have gotten into the business of selling plants, which on one hand is great, but people

need more than just basic information when they buy a plant. Some of my followers will tell me, “The person who sold this to me didn’t tell me anything about how to care for this!” Some plants are difficult! To be successful, people need help picking the right plant for their lifestyle.

“A lack of a green thumb stems from a lack of correct information and diligent routine care. With informed selections and an at-home maintenance schedule, anyone can be a green thumb!”

—Stacey Bal

TheFloraculturist.com

THE BORN BELIEVER

Stacey Bal

AIFD, EMC



Instagram Handle: @thefloraculturist
Instagram Followers: 7,800+

Beyond Social: Bal, a member of the Floriology Education Team, is a long-time floral designer and educator known for her workshops and video tutorials. The designer in residence at City Scents in Chicago, she recently partnered with Arthur Williams, AIFD, EMC, CPF, to write “Impermanent,” a book that explores the intersection of language and fresh botanical design.

Floral Management: You have a long history in the floral industry, but how did you become so immersed in plants specifically?

Stacey Bal: I am a second-generation, fully dedicated florist and plant expert. I was born into the plant and flower business, as my mother went to school for ornamental horticulture while I was in the womb. I followed in her footsteps and built a career around connecting with people through nature and art. My favorite jobs have all centered around greenhouses, landscaping, interior plant design, and floral design.

Plants, specifically indoor plants or interior plant design, perennially draw me in for their ability to blur lines between inside and outside, to soften the edges of manmade materials and structures, and for their innate and proven ability to reduce stress and promote wellness. Because I frequent urban areas, I feel especially connected with the power to transform interiors in limitless ways by making nature accessible to everyone regardless of limitations of geographical location.

FM: Why do you think plants are having such a moment now?

SB: The houseplant boom of 2020 is undoubtedly rooted in the public's reaction to the struggles of the worldwide pandemic. The majority of the increase comes from the desire to beautify personal interiors as the investment in home has never been more paramount. Other factors are a heightened need for comfort and nurturing, an interest in growing food at home, a desire to imitate social media influencers, and simply for the sake of having more time on one's hands. This "trend" is here to stay and will evolve with us as we continue to adapt to this new home- and social media-centric world of ours.

FM: What are the big, plant-centric trends you love most right now?

SB: My container-driven favorites are plant stands or any pedestal-style container with significant transparency beneath a plant, matte finishes, and unique textures. And my forever favorite styling techniques are no-commitment, easy-to-rotate botanical statement walls — I built one in my home! — layering

GO WILD Stacey Bal, AIFD, EMC, looks for creative containers to add value and finishing touches.

plants in a multitude of varieties and sizes, trailing vines, and propagating specific plants in clear containers and water. In terms of specific plants, *Passiflora edulis* and *Passiflora incarnata* are my favorites. There's something about the vining habit, the tendrils, and of course the otherworldly intricacy of their short-lived blooms. The delicious fruit is a noteworthy bonus!

FM: What plants do you predict will rise in popularity in 2021?

SB: *Rhipsalis baccifera* (mistletoe cactus) for its trailing habit; *Phlebodium aureum* (blue star fern) for its low light uniqueness, *Ficus benghalensis* (fig) for its ability to be low maintenance, and *Ficus lyrata* (fiddle-leaf fig).

FM: Some consumers (and retail florists) are intimidated by caring for plants. What's your advice to them?

SB: Education is key! A lack of a green thumb stems from a lack of correct information and diligent routine care. With informed selections and an at-home maintenance schedule, anyone can be a green thumb! 🌿

Mary Westbrook is the editor in chief of *Floral Management* magazine.



COURTNEY STACEY BAL