Greening Up Your Pest Control Shelves: It’s Not Just About Products  
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Scott Peterson, hardgoods buyer for Sloat Garden Centers, has built the company’s green pest control alternatives into a major department and makes merchandising decisions based on his customers’ feedback.

Today we all want to attract that consumer who is looking for greener products into our stores, especially since they represent an ever-increasing percentage of nursery customers. Some of us in the industry may think the secret to success with this category lies solely in having the “right mix” of products. Clearly though, that’s not all there is to it.

This new customer—and some of our old customers—are seeking to change the way they manage pests in their gardens. After working for ten years in the “less toxic” pest management movement, I have observed some basic principals that can guide you to success.

Garden Rx: Do no harm
Underlying everything is the need to define the pest management philosophy of your business. What message are you trying to convey? As horticulturists and stewards of the land, we pride ourselves on making ethical recommendations. We train our nursery staff to understand what plants will grow in certain conditions. For example, plant impatiens in shade, zinnias in sunny areas, and protect citrus trees in freezing weather.

The same should be true for our pest management recommendations. Suggest the least invasive method first. The goal is to keep pest populations at a level low enough to prevent garden damage beyond the customer’s tolerance level. At the top of the list should be “First Do No Harm”. This directive needs to come from the top down: owners, managers, buyers, and sales staff.

Successful messaging to the customer starts with a commitment to educate your staff on insect and disease identification. An educated, experienced staff will garner customer trust. Customer trust translates to repeat business. Continuous training of all staff members on pest and disease problems that bring customers to your store needs to be a part of your green merchandising strategy. What effective solutions can staff recommend to customers? Featuring pests and diseases of the month and their identification and solutions is a way to keep staff and customers up to date on seasonal problems in local gardens.

To build store credibility it’s essential to have unbiased resources for staff training. Where do you access neutral training? Local government and environmental programs like “Our Water Our World” are good places to start. Agricultural extension programs and non-profit environmental programs offer tremendous support to your business. Many are looking to partner with you to get out their message to protect our natural resources or prevent invasive plants and pests from threatening our local environment. Advertising that your staff has been trained by these programs will draw customers seeking nonbiased information.

Making consistent recommendations is another key to customer trust. Have knowledgeable key staff members mentor not only the public, but also other less experienced staff in this category to benefit everyone. Customers are often frustrated by getting too many different suggestions and often leave frustrated not knowing whom to believe. Also key is giving your staff and customers a few—but not too many—choices. Too many options confuse and confound. If aphids are the problem, offer three solutions: a stiff stream of water, an insecticidal soap, and a horticultural oil.

Eight ways to say “green” on the shelf
The number one category to include in an earth-friendly assortment is organic fertilizers and mulches. The underpinning of a healthy garden is the soil. If the soil has adequate microbial activity and beneficial mychorral fungi, the garden will have less disease and pest problems. Mulches not only suppress weeds and keep in moisture, they create a habitat for beneficial insects.

• Fertilizers and mulches. Include lawn, simples, and plant specific. Create large displays of fertilizers
and mulches—mulches will need to be replaced or augmented annually because they break down in the soil. Fertilizers are a multiple-use product for the season; fertilizers diluted with water such as kelp extract and fish emulsion will need to be reapplied every few weeks during the growing season, and weekly for container gardens.

- **Encourage customers to make beneficial insects and birds part of the pest control balance.** How do we attract them? How do we introduce beneficial insects? How do we create a garden habitat for “Mother Nature’s helpers”? We need to offer them food, water and shelter. Knowing what plants attract the predators and pollinators allows nurseries to add a large category of seeds and plant material for sale. Many nurseries have developed handouts that list the local plants that attract beneficials and pollinators. This can support the sale of the beneficial insects.

It is important to know how to store beneficial insects in a retail environment. Many stores have a refrigerator for the lady beetles, mantid egg cases, and beneficial nematodes. Proper maintenance of these insects is vital to customer success. Beneficial nematodes need to be refrigerated before use and should be applied at dusk as they can die in the presence of sunlight. The area has to be watered before and afterward and kept moist in order for the nematodes to move about and seek their prey. Many customers fail because they do not understand proper application. The more success with the application, the more trust and repeat business will result.

**Monitoring, trapping, and barrier methods.** This includes hand lenses for diagnosis, pheromone traps, sticky traps, copper barrier tape for slugs and snails, snail traps, gopher cages to protect plant roots, weed barrier fabric, and much more. Contech has brought to market a pine bark beetle pheromone that can be used to protect healthy pine trees. It uses verbennone, which is a pheromone that communicates overcrowding to the other pine bark beetles. The category of traps and attractants has grown exponentially in the past year and can be a large part of a green section.

- **Insecticides and molluscicides.** The insecticides include insect soaps, horticultural oils, and botanicals like pyrethrins that give a fast knockdown and dissipate within hours in the presence of sunlight. They also include essential oils like clove, cinnamon, and thyme oils that offer a fast knock down with proven repelling qualities.

The molluscicides need to include iron phosphate baits. These do not contaminate the vegetable crops and are safe to use around pets and wildlife. San Francisco Bay Area-based Sloat Garden Centers’ hard goods buyer Scott Peterson is very passionate about protecting pets and wildlife that visit gardens. Scott believes that you can protect pets and wildlife, and still meet the customer’s needs to protect their plants from slugs and snails. In response to the concerns of local communities that Sloat Gardens Centers serves, he will be phasing out metaldehyde in their Marin County stores in 2009.

- **Fungicides.** These can include plant based products such as neem and rosemary, copper soaps that are made with 80% less copper than traditional copper sprays, bio-fungicides such as *Bacillus subtilis* subsp., and a tried-and-true favorite sulfur, which also doubles as an effective miticide.

- **Herbicides.** There are pre-emergent such as corn gluten meal and post emergent sprays such as d-limonene, clove oil, acetic acid, ammonium soaps of fatty acids, and potassium salts of fatty acids. Most of these post emergent sprays work well for shallow rooted annual weeds. In the weed control category you can also include tools to remove weeds like flamers, weed forks, hula hoes and weed barrier fabric.

- **Rodents.** Include rodent exclusion, live traps, kill traps, and repellents in your assortment. Castor oil has become a favorite effective repellent for moles and gophers when used on a regular 6-week basis.

Offer your customers a product list of your insecticides, predator insects, fungicides, herbicides, and traps. This becomes particularly handy for landscapers or school districts that might want to know about your array of greener products. Summerwinds Nurseries in San Jose, California, has a “Garden Alternatives” list that they offer at in-store special events.
Merchandising the Category

Staging a separate section for greener alternatives near the rest of the pesticides is more popular these days. Customers are now looking for the section when they come into the store. Van Winden Nursery in Napa, California, has their environmentally friendly products area well signed and placed at the entrance to the pest control section. This is the first place the staff brings customers seeking pest control. The products are also clearly tagged with "Choose Less Toxic Products" labels.

This past year, Summerwinds Nurseries dedicated a 20-foot section to less toxic products in their larger stores, and also dedicated a 150-sq ft additional floor space for these products. Large displays of organic fertilizers and pesticides are floor stacked into a big visual statement, demonstrating to customers that they are serious about the category.

Merchandising insect traps on pegboard makes it easy for your customers to see the bevy of traps now on the market and keeps traps from tumbling over on the shelves.

Orchard Supply Hardware, with 83 stores in California, has shelf-talkers on all of their less toxic products and also has literature racks stocked with information on solving pest problems without toxic chemicals. Patti McIntosh, their pesticide buyer, has been actively supporting the "Our Water Our World" program for over 10 years. Patti feels the shelf-talkers make it easy for staff and customers to find the less toxic products.

Some stores display end-caps that change seasonally and are pest based: rose care, snail management, vegetable gardening, pet-friendly products. The pet friendly end caps have been very popular the past two years and give the opportunity for customers and staff to share pet photos on the header above the products. These end-caps support the message that you are in the business of offering greener alternatives. Merchandising more toxic products in large stacks sends a mixed message to your customers, and many will not feel you are sincere about your goal to offer greener alternatives.

What the customer needs to know

Customer expectations are a vital part of your plan. Setting your customer up with the right expectations when using the products only adds to your credibility. I have seen customers walk away from the category because they do not understand how the products work.

For example, when using iron phosphate bait, the customer should know that slugs and snails will discontinue feeding immediately and will go away from the feeding area to die. Customers won't see the large piles of dead snails typical after using metaldehyde baits. When using Bt for caterpillars, customers need to know the caterpillars feed for a day or so, the bacteria destroys their gut, and they will then drop off and die.

Soaps and horticultural oils must come into contact with the insect in order to kill it. The upside is that no toxic residues are left behind, but they must be reapplied when future infestations occur. Timing of application is also critical. Knowing about the pest's life cycle is critical. Applying pesticides when the pest is most vulnerable to the less toxic products will ensure success.

When using neem, customers should be informed that it has repelling qualities such as anti feeding, anti egg laying and also prevents some insects from molting to the next stage. Neem also acts as a protectant for future outbreaks of rust, powdery mildew, and blackspot.

Setting out traps to monitor pest populations will give your customers signals that action might be required. Applying pesticides after the pests have flown away is futile.

Gardeners who are seeking green products can become your loyal customers. But, you can't just stock and shelf the products... you must support the line, train your staff, and earn the customers trust.