

Front Lines

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Pre-Sales for Early Spring Success

Jennifer Polanz

This spring I saw a couple pre-sale efforts by retail garden centers, including a particularly eye-catching one from Groovy Plants Ranch outside Columbus, Ohio. I reached out to co-owner Liz Hughes to find out more about their process.

"I think this is our third year in earnest—they happened organically during COVID," she said of the pre-sales, which they started close to the beginning of this year after the holidays were done. "We already had a website and were shipping product. We were selling online during COVID for pickup and this was a natural progression from what we were already doing with the infrastructure."

They use emails, social media channels, the website and even in-store signage to promote pre-sales on select varieties, including everything from Canary Wings Begonia (which her husband, Jared, bred) and Coleus ColorBlaze El Brighto to Centaurea Silver Swirl and Hardy Banana Musa Basjoo. Many of the offerings are in packs of three, called trios or BiggerVigor Trio. I asked Liz why they sold them in threes and she said it was to make sure customers have better success by planting multiples in their gardens or pots.

Once customers place their orders, closer to the end of April they receive a two-to-three-week window in which they can come to the store and pick up their plants.

"We strongly encourage them to not come on the weekend—we say for shorter lines to come during the week," she said, adding people still do come on the weekends. The pickup line is separate from the regular line for checkout, but it's still a very busy time.

So how do they pick those select plants that get the pre-sale treatment and the amount they'll offer?

"It's based on last year's supply and demand," she said of the amount. "We're making decisions based on how many we think we can sell and what's available. Restocking is based on supply and growing space. We planned to fill our spaces, so can we squeeze any more in or can our partner growers accommodate that?"

As for the varieties themselves, she said the main thing is they have to be, well ... groovy!

"They are our favorites, plants we like, high-performing plants," she added. "We want plants that are going to be successful for our customers. We don't do something that's unproven to us."

The benefit of pre-sales, of course, is the influx of revenue during January and February, and the knowledge of what needs to be grown (with more for the retail benches, too). For them, it helps pay for the added staff they start onboarding by the end of January to get ready for the season. You can see on their website, too, which plants are

already sold out. It's also consistent engagement with customers during a time when they're dreaming about spring.

The drawbacks are the logistics themselves. Liz said they planned far ahead, taking photos of varieties last spring and summer to make sure they had great shots (and some video) for digital marketing. It also takes effort during the sales window. If you go on autopilot, she said, you could oversell accidentally. It doesn't take a ton of time, but you can't let it go, she added. Pickup means protocols on designated pick-up areas and making sure everyone gets what they ordered.

"It's an interesting model and it's working for us," Liz said. "It's something you need to plan ahead. You'd have to know you're going to do it next year to plan your photos.

"With a program like this, starting with a smaller amount of plants is not a bad idea. A few winners and you can work out the kinks with the process all the way through." **GP**