

Now the real challenge is

at hand! There is quite a buzz building. The industry, it seems, has found a new source of energy and inspiration through *Garden Chic*. That's great! It is exactly what I had hoped to achieve. More importantly, it will take this energy and inspiration to truly transform the garden center environment into the dynamic, ever-changing business it can and needs to become.

Let's tackle the "need" side of this issue first. Why is it a necessity for our whole culture and way of approaching our product selection, store design, merchandising techniques and customer outreach to expand and go to the next level? The across-the-board trend in retail sales goes to the low-cost and, conversely, the luxury, high-end retailers. This increasing pressure will force independents to the high end of the scale. We certainly can't compete with the buying power of the big boxes, so the only option for survival is to upscale.

So ... what exactly does "upscale" mean? It refers to the overall shopping environment. Consumers are more interested in their overall experience than they used to be. People are willing to pay more for a really great experience than they are to just buy a few plants at a run-of-the-mill garden center.

So how can you do it? How can you upscale your store? What is it that makes shopping an experience and a retail store a pleasing environment? The answer is multi-faceted but not overly complicated.

Consumers want to be inspired. They want to walk into your store and see ideas and concepts they can adapt to their yards and gardens. This requires vignettes and mini display gardens, among other things. They don't need to be overly fancy, but they do need to exist.

Atmosphere is also important. What can

you do in your store to create a warm and inviting place to shop? Warm it up with color. Put a slight curve in your aisles so customers feel more as if they are on a garden walk instead of marching down aisles. Are your products displayed in a convenient, user-friendly way? Are your bathrooms clean and orderly, or are your customers climbing over boxes to get to the dusty, run-down restroom?

Consumers also look for value. What? Value and upscale/high-end? At first glance, that may appear to be an oxymoron. Not at all! Value doesn't necessarily mean low prices. Value can be found in many forms, such as convenience, overall shopping experience, unique product selection and, yes, high-end merchandise at a fair price.

Customers will expect to find things at your store that they can't find anywhere else. Do your buying practices include seeking out independent-only vendors? Do you try to stock unique plant varieties or colors not found at the boxes? Maybe you could find local artists who would love to showcase their works in your store. Or perhaps your uniqueness comes from the way you display your merchandise. Are you displaying your plants in creative ways, or are they just lined up as the boxes do it?

Now, you don't want to go overboard, here. Customers will still expect to find the "usual" items, such as soils, fertilizers and controls. This relates back to convenience. They don't want to run all over town to get what you don't have, and you don't want them to have to go to the boxes to get what you haven't stocked.

At this point, it is easy to become overwhelmed, but there's really no reason to feel this way. Start by simply making a list of things you would like to change in your store. Then, address one thing at a time. Whittle away at each task on your list, one step at a time.

