

Patty's Plants: Selling Organics Face to Face

Reaching out to the community via seminars and event booths grows a loyal customer base

by
Amy Stewart

WHEN PATTY BAILEY RETIRED from 22 years of employment at a garden center, she had no idea that her retirement would last only five months. "My husband told me that I either needed to start my own business or go get another job," she says. "He said, 'You've been using organic products for the last 30 years. Just make it a specialty organic shop that does all the things you're interested in: tropicals, perennials, annuals, certified organic herbs and vegetables and local art.'"

Four years later, Patty's Plants Natural and Organic Garden Supply in Milton, WI, is thriving. In fact, it recently moved to a more visible location just down the street from its original store, and it now employs four to five people.

Located in a historic shopping district, the new location is inside an



1840s-era building that was once a church. The garden center joined a cafe and a few other small shops in the space. Patty operates the retail shop indoors and the nursery yard along the busy street. "There's a stoplight right next to the nursery," she says. "Everybody has to stop and look at my business."

Patty knew from the start that she would sell only organic and natural products. During the years she worked at the other garden center, the only organic products the store carried were the ones she asked the owners to order for her own use. "I would ask them to bring things in for me, and then I

offered to sell them. But the owners were afraid to sell organics, and they just thought it was easier to sell chemicals. They didn't understand how to talk to people about feeding the soil."

Patty saw an opportunity to be the only store in town specializing in organic and natural garden products. "You have to go to Madison or Rockford, which are each 30 miles away, to find these kind of organic products," she says.

Getting the Word Out Pays

Patty's customers are deeply committed to organics. "I have a lot of young families with children, age

25 to 35, and it's really important to them. They only want organic seeds and plants." Older customers might not be as committed to organics, but they are loyal to Patty. "Many of them followed me here from my previous job," she says. "They just want cool-looking things. They love it that I'll plant their containers for them. I'll even go to



their house and do all their containers."

To promote the business and educate customers face to face, Patty hosts free classes about once a month. "If I do a talk here to about 15 people, I would say 12 of 15 of them will buy something," she says. She speaks to garden clubs and at the local botanical garden as well. "I hand out coupons at those events, and I would say that if I have 30 people at a talk, 20 will redeem the coupon."

Patty also gets the word out about her business by setting up a booth at a local herb fair, during a vegetable tasting sponsored by Master Gardeners and at an Earth Day event at the college. "If I offer to give a talk, they usually give me a break on the booth space," she says.

In addition to marketing through e-mail newsletters and Facebook, she finds that it is worthwhile to join with other local businesses to do television advertising. "I do a TV ad with a local winery, an antique store and a gift shop that's also an ice cream shop," she says. "With four of us, it's really economical - it costs me \$100 per month."

Her biggest challenge is the people who come in and have no idea that Patty's is an organic store. "They look at the products, and the word 'organic' scares them. The challenge is explaining that this is not scary, it's actually easy," she says. "Some people are not going to change. It doesn't bother me if they go other places. Most people see how well it works, and they come back for more."

Organics In Demand

In green goods, Patty's specializes in unusual annuals, edibles and select tropicals. When possible, she buys plants that were grown organically and are certified-organic. Once in the garden center, the plants are treated using only organic methods.

When she began sourcing organic plants, Patty contacted small organic farmers in the area running community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, through which community members pay an annual fee to get a weekly box of produce from the farm. "I asked them if they were growing anything extra I could buy," she says, "but they were mostly just growing for themselves. They did lead me to some other growers who grew herbs and vegetables organically within 30 miles of here, however." Those referrals were enough to get her started. This year, for the first time, a local farmer only a mile down the road grew about 36 different varieties of heirloom tomatoes, vegetables and herbs for her. "It's his first time, so we are starting small," she says. "It's so important to support local growers. I try to buy everything within a 60- to 70-mile radius." Customers have also recommended growers who might have organic plants for sale. "It's all about networking," Patty says.

All controls sold at the store are natural or organic.

“People come in, looking for the chemicals they’ve been using their whole lives,” she says. “I let them know that we’ve got better and safer products, but that it’s not a quick fix. If your soil has been depleted by chemicals all these years, it’s going to take a while to build it back up.”

Patty’s top sellers include a milky spore product from St. Gabriel Organics that gardeners use to control Japanese beetles. “The problem with Japanese beetles is that if they’re all over the neighborhood, you need to work together,” she says. “I started suggesting to my customers that they buy it in bulk and do their whole neighborhood. I like the idea of neighbors getting together.”

Another best seller is Serenade from AgraQuest, which helps control late blight. “I have had farmer customers who grow a lot of tomatoes, and they buy gallons of it,” she says.

She also sells Veggie Pharm and Weed Pharm, both from Pharm Solutions, which control Japanese beetles and weeds respectively.



Patty’s customers like the FoxFarm Soil & Fertilizer Company products, including the Happy Frog and Ocean Forest soils. “I sell a lot of their 3-cubic-foot soil conditioner, which is great to use as top-dressing,” she says. “It has worm castings, bat guano and tiny pieces of bark.” She continues, “I can’t keep it in stock. If I’m out of it and I try to offer people another brand, they just tell me they’ll wait until my next shipment comes in.” She also carries FoxFarm’s granular Peace of Mind and Happy Frog fertilizers.

“I try not to carry the same products that the big box stores have,” Patty says. “There are lots of smaller businesses out there that produce good products. The majority of the items I carry are things that I have already used myself.” ■

FOR MORE PHOTOS, VISIT BEGARDENCHIC.COM