

TREES Add Life

INFORMATIVE, EYE-CATCHING
PROMOTIONAL DISPLAYS CAN
HELP RETAILERS SELL TREES.

by SUSAN BARTON

Are you selling as many trees as you'd like? If so, stop reading. If not, there's a program that may interest you: Trees Add Life[®]. This program involves using point-of-sale garden center displays designed to promote tree sales and educate consumers on proper tree selection, planting and maintenance. The goal of Trees Add Life[®] is to increase customer confidence in planting trees — and to boost profits from tree sales. "The industry needs to get together to promote the planting of trees," says Nancy Buley, marketing and communications director at J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. in Boring, OR.

I got the idea for the Trees Add Life[®] program after several retailers told me tree sales were down. It seemed customers weren't investing in high-ticket items such as trees. Some homeowners feared the trees would die or be more difficult to care for than perennials.

The International Society of Arboriculture publishes many informative brochures that could reduce gardeners' fears, but customers don't get them or, when they do, they don't bother to read them. So retailers must educate consumers at the place of purchase — the garden center. Rather than simply handing out brochures, garden centers need to promote trees in an almost completely visual display, which should convey only four or five main concepts.

I sent a proposal for a pilot retail-display program to the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council, and the organization agreed to fund it. The program was developed here at the University of Delaware, Newark. From the Food & Resource Economics Department, professor Tom Ilvento and graduate student Pete Jamieson worked with me on this project.

Developed with significant input from the garden center industry, the program has recently completed its first pilot season. In summer and fall 1998, University of Delaware researchers met two focus groups — the American Nursery & Landscape Association's (ANLA) Garden Centers of America board at the ANLA meeting in Atlanta and the Earl May Seed Co. Cooperative Meeting in Kansas City, MO. The groups pointed out that displays should have a balance of educational content and promotion. They also indicated that displays should be flexible enough to be used indoors and outdoors, resistant to ultraviolet light and durable enough to last at least one season.

Based on this information, Barbara Broge, graphic artist at the University of Delaware, designed a display prototype: a freestanding display that could be used as a sandwich board or mounted on a lattice background. The freestanding display included accessories — tree hanging tags, trunk liners and shopping bags — that provided detailed tree selection, planting and care instructions. We presented this prototype at The ANLA Management Clinic in Louisville, KY, in 1999 and encouraged retailers to fill out response surveys. The professionals were enthusiastic about the display.

Retailers made excellent suggestions to improve the technical content of the display.

The picture on the banner is designed to be as informative as the text, clearly showing the root ball a couple of inches higher than surrounding soil and the base of the trunk untouched by mulch.

For example, the numbered tree-planting steps had been counter-clockwise. Following the advice of retailers, we made them clockwise for easier readability. A picture paints a thousand words, and retailers wanted the illustration of the planted tree to be as informative as the text. Thus, we modified the picture of a planted tree to clearly show the root ball a couple of inches higher than surrounding soil and the base of the trunk untouched by mulch (illustration, right).

At The Management Clinic, we encouraged as many retailers as possible to have their businesses become pilot sites. This meant they would agree to have banners, tree hanging tags and trunk liners at their stores. Twenty-five retailers applied, and each became a pilot site.

A BANNER SEASON. After we determined the pilot sites, a printer produced vertical banners and distributed two to each site. Some sites paid extra to receive one or two additional banners. All sites also received setup instructions, promotional information, a supply of tree hanging tags and a roll of trunk liners. We sent pilot sites a survey in spring 1999 to determine the retailers' initial reaction to the display, and we sent another survey at the end of the fall season to get their final reaction.

Garden center managers and owners who participated in the pilot program rated as good or excellent the banners' overall look (93 percent), size (100 percent), color scheme (85 percent) and clarity of information (95 percent). They also liked the appearance and clarity of information on the tree hanging tags and trunk liners. About 80 percent of the participants felt the display had a positive impact on their customers. "The banners were highly informative, and the planting instructions shown by the colorful birds were very creative and eye-catching," said one respondent. "Simply put, and the artwork was perfect," said another.

During this time, we chose

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four of the pilot sites — three in Delaware and one in Pennsylvania — to survey their customers. Upon entering the garden centers, shoppers filled out a brief, general survey. In this initial survey, 53 percent rated their knowledge of tree planting as excellent or good. The other 47 percent rated their knowledge as fair or weak. This represents an important educational opportunity for garden centers: Customers who are educated about tree planting and care are more likely to make tree purchases than those who are ill-informed.

The same customers were asked to complete another survey when they finished shopping. The second survey measured their responses to the banner displays. Customer response to the banner was enthusiastic. More than 75 percent of respondents liked the overall look of the banner, the color scheme and the clarity of the information. They also reacted positively to the tree hanging tags. Overall, 98 percent of those surveyed found the information in the Trees Add LifeSM display helpful. Seventy-five percent of participants expressed that the display gave them confidence and increased their knowledge of tree selection, planting and care. Seventy percent said they felt encouraged to plant a tree after viewing the banner.

To encourage creative promotional-display ideas, we conducted the Garden Center Display Contest in fall 1999. Five pilot-site retailers submitted entries. The judges were Clint Albin, partner of The Garden Center Management Group, a consulting company in Washington, DC; the management team at McDonald Nurseries Inc., Hampton, VA;

This promotional companion banner encouraging tree planting will be available this fall.

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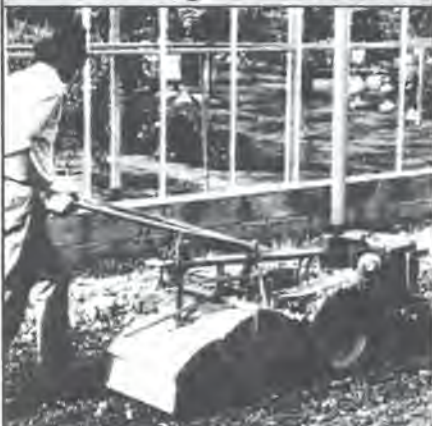


PHOTO COURTESY OF SCHWARZ NURSERY

Above: Schwarz Nursery's program was the most comprehensive of contest entries: It included newsletter articles, news releases and additional signs promoting the Trees Add Life program.

Below: Hicks Nurseries Inc. received first place in the Garden Center Display Contest with an excellent tree-planting display.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF HICKS NURSERIES INC.

and me. Hicks Nurseries Inc., Westbury, NY, received first place with an excellent tree-planting display behind a Plexiglas shield (photo, left). The display clearly showed the planting process. Schwarz Nursery, Addison, IL, received second place for its display (photo, above). Schwarz Nursery's program was the most comprehensive of the entries: It included newsletter articles, news releases and additional signs promoting the Trees Add Life program.

THE GOAL OF TREES ADD LIFE

IS TO INCREASE CUSTOMER

CONFIDENCE IN PLANTING

TREES — AND TO BOOST

PROFITS FROM TREE SALES.

The photos of each display and judges' comments can be found on the Trees Add Life Web site at <http://www.treesaddlife.org>. The Web site also includes an overview of the Trees Add Life program, display setup instructions and

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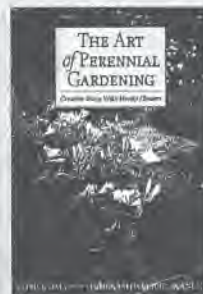


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By Patrick Lima

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newsletter articles that might be useful to the industry.

To purchase a Trees Add Life[™] package, retailers should contact Sunrise Marketing, 30 Arbor St., Hartford, CT 06106. Call (888) 393-4443 or fax (860) 233-2756; Internet sunrisemarketing.com. Each package costs \$75 and includes a 30-by-50-inch, four-color banner; newsletter articles; 25 sample Trees Add Life[™] hanging tree tags; assorted promotional templates; logo and ad slicks; and a listing on the Trees Add Life[™] Web site. We have also developed a promotional companion banner that will be available this fall (illustration, page 99).

A PICTURE PAINTS A THOUSAND

WORDS, AND RETAILERS

WANTED THE ILLUSTRATION

OF THE PLANTED TREE TO BE

AS INFORMATIVE AS THE TEXT.

THUS, WE MODIFIED

THE PICTURE OF A PLANTED

TREE TO CLEARLY SHOW THE

ROOT BALL A COUPLE OF INCHES

HIGHER THAN SURROUNDING

SOIL AND THE BASE OF THE

TRUNK UNTOUCHED BY MULCH.

The success of the Trees Add Life[™] project depends on whether garden centers purchase the promotional displays. However, marketing is an ever-changing phenomenon, so ideally a new banner should be produced each year to prevent consumer indifference.

Educating customers on tree selection, planting and care will help them become more comfortable with purchasing trees. And more purchases can mean a banner year for your business.

Susan Barton is an extension specialist at the Department of Plant & Soil Sciences at the University of Delaware, Newark.

The Trees Add Life[™] program is sponsored by the University of Delaware; Sunrise Marketing, Hartford, CT; The Garden Center Management Group, Washington, DC; and J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co., Boring, OR. American Nurseryman Publishing Co. endorses the program. ♡