

The No-Brainer Moneymaker

| Ellen C. Wells

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Every garden center has its hits, its sure-things, the products that make the bacon and fry it up in a pan. You know what yours are, definitely. But you could maybe use another back-up product just in case, right?

Here's your chance to steal—er, I mean get inspired by—the no-brainer moneymakers employed by other garden centers throughout the U.S.

Ken Lain, Watters Garden Center, Prescott, Arizona

Moneymaker No. 1: 4-in. annuals.

Moneymaker No. 2: Private-label potting soils.

"The POS numbers never lie," Ken wrote in to Green Profit. "I ran a report on our top 10 items that generate the most profit. The No. 1 most-profitable item here at Watters is a 4-in. annual at \$4.99."

As you'll see throughout this piece, annuals grown in-house are a sure thing for many grower-retailers. But let's look at the rest of Ken's POS report.

"The No. 2 most-profitable item may surprise you," Ken continues. "We private-label our own potting soil and sell truckloads. We sell Watters 1.5 cu.ft. Premium Potting Soil for \$11.99. The unusual volume is due to educating our customers on the value of Watters Premium Potting Soil through garden columns, Facebook contest, hands-on garden classes on raised bed gardening and selling resort-sized glazed containers. It is possible to sell soils at a premium price when it's a premium product in your own label."

Gail and Vic Vanik, Four Seasons Greenhouse & Garden Center, Dolores, Colorado

Moneymaker No. 1: Homemade compost

Moneymaker No. 2: 3.5-in. basil

The Vaniks have gone gung-ho into food production in recent years. One of the products that is selling like gangbusters is sunflower greens—essentially protein-rich sprouts that can be used for all sorts of fresh applications. They grow and sell about 500 lbs. of the stuff each week. If you ask any sprouts or microgreens producer, this product can be quite the moneymaker.

But the real and unexpected money comes after the fact, according to the Vaniks. "With all the food that we're doing and the sunflower greens that we are selling, when we're done growing them in 10 days, we compost it. We take the soilless mix and whatever is left in the way of roots or stems, we put it in a big pile and we compost it."

The pile started to grow and Vic was left wondering what to do with it all. "We started selling it for \$25 per tractor scoop (about 20 cu.ft.). Then we raised it to \$40 and for a couple of years we raised it to \$50. We raised it to \$60 and we still can't keep it in stock! We have a waiting list that goes back to October right now."

In 2015 the Vaniks sold 113 scoops at \$60 per scoop for a total of \$6,780. There's no cost involved to the business because they've already expensed it through the growing. "It doesn't cost me a thing, except to start up the Kubota and take a scoop of it. I have people who would take as much as I could give them, but I have a two-scoop maximum." Their customers are really excited about it, as they can see the good it does for their gardens. It's certified organic, too.

Also a no-brainer moneymaker are 3.5-in. pots of basil. Sowing just three or four seeds per pot, the cost per pot to them is 38 cents, and they are selling it for \$3.49.

Karen Thacker, Altum's Garden Center, Zionsville, Indiana

Moneymaker: Grab & Go Containers

At Altum's, the Grab & Go containers are a sure thing for sales. In a variety of sizes, these fiber pots can be dropped into a customer's existing cast-iron or glazed container, says Karen. Using 4-in. pots of flowering plants, each combination is unique. "We've gotten quite a bit of a following for these," she says. "It's kind of our niche because you're not going to get these at the box stores or grocery stores because they are all hand-made here."

Altum's has a few different categories of Grab & Gos, including porch pots. They have porch pots and specialty living arrangements—think indoor items to be used as hostess gifts, centerpieces, at receptions and so on. Depending on the size, porch pots can run anywhere between \$47 to \$87, and the specialty living arrangements can be in the \$200s!

Frank Fernicola, Fairfield Garden Center, Fairfield, New Jersey

Moneymaker No. 1: Forsythia

Moneymaker No. 2: Early-spring pond seminar

Customers love color early in the season. The folks at Fairfield Garden Center in New Jersey try to capitalize on that. "Early on we usually bring in some golden forsythia—a few hundred of them—and as they start to bloom in people's yards they remember that forsythia is a plant that is relatively attractive, so they want more," says Frank. "It's a hot seller when it's in bloom and we go through several hundred. If they are bought right, you could buy them low and then sell them for a decent margin. Still, they offer a value to the customer. That is always a good go-to shrub to start the season."

Opportunities for bringing in some cash come even earlier than the first forsythia blooms. For the last few years Fairfield Garden Center—well known in its area for being experts in ponds and water gardening—has offered a "how to open your pond after winter" style seminar in late March. "The seminar night usually packs in 80 to 100 people into our seminar room," says Frank. "It's a pretty good night for sales at the end of March, and it's the only time we stay open late that month. There's a very small discount—maybe 10% off in the pond department—but people are in and they are just filling their carts with pond stuff, everything they think they need to get the pond going. It's a real specific seminar that people are definitely interested in at that point of the year."

A.J. Petitti, Petitti Garden Centers, Cleveland, Ohio

Moneymaker: Growing your own product

"Hands down" the best way for Petitti's to make the most money, says A.J. Petitti's grows about 98% of all the plants they sell, so A.J. can speak from experience when he explains the benefits: production at a very low cost and having control of the availability.

Like last spring, for example. "We had a horrible spring," A.J. explains. "The weather was terrible and we went into Memorial Day down 30%." But they made up for it and evened up for the year during the last 10 days of the month because they had control over their inventory. "Having that much control over your product and distribution, we're able to get into those stores and keep pumping material in. If we had to deal with outside vendors it would have been a lot more difficult to get that kind of volume of material into the stores that quickly and efficiently without having issues."

Growing your own product is not only a huge competitive advantage, A.J. says, it's also their biggest strength.

Dave Williams, Williams Nursery & The Gift House, Westfield, New Jersey

Moneymaker: SunPatiens sale weekend

For most garden retailers, May is the moneymaking month. For Williams Nursery, April brings an unexpected shower of cash. "The last weekend in April is one of our busiest weekends of the year," says Dave. That's when they offer up their SunPatiens sale.

Back before the Impatiens Downy Mildew outbreak, that weekend was all about the impatiens. But SunPatiens has become an even better substitute.

"Now instead of selling flats that we would normally sell at \$17.99 for the regular impatiens and on sale for \$12.99, we're selling SunPatiens in the jumbo 6-pack, normally \$50.99 and on sale that weekend for \$29.99," Dave explains. "We're actually getting a substantial dollar return on it."

Not only is it a substantial dollar, it's a substantial Friday-Sunday weekend, bringing in upwards of \$150,000—enough, Dave says, to pay his May invoices.

Valerie Nalls, Nalls Produce, Alexandria, Virginia

Moneymaker: Video marketing

Valerie Nalls brings in the cash by implementing a strategy, not necessarily relying on a go-to product. "My way to bring in some cash is video marketing," Valerie explains. "It's talking about a single retail product in a video."

The videos—which go up on the company's Facebook page and are also sent out via an email blast—include Valerie talking briefly about just one product—a product that she will also put on a one-day special. "Because I'm looking at the camera—basically looking at that customer—and saying 'Here's this product, here's why I love it, here is where you can physically find it in the store when you come in,' I'll have a decent turn-out of people that act on that video and come in right away," she explains. "So many more just watch it and don't come in that day but they remember it."

Valerie goes on to explain that when walking around the store with a customer, you can use your personality and your sales skills. "That's hard to do if they aren't here. [The video] makes them feel like they know me, makes them feel like they can trust me because I'm being truthful and honest. It builds that trust factor a lot faster than just print," she says. As she says, it's the good, old-fashioned sales relationship—it's just being employed over a screen.

Jenell Martin, Catalpa Grove Farm, Columbiana, Ohio

Moneymaker: Down Under container workshop

Catalpa Grove Farm is known locally for some amazingly huge and beautiful hanging baskets. Their moneymaking idea is a spin on that. It's a workshop that plants up Down Under containers. Down Unders are glazed terra cotta pots used similarly to a Topsy Turvy tomato—with the plants growing out of the bottom.

"I like to get them started in February," Jenell explains. "This year we had a whole bunch left over and we thought, 'Hey, what if people would come in and plant up their own with small plants?' It was a huge hit. It's a pricier item than some of my workshops, but some people made more than one." Workshop attendees leave the Down Unders in the good hands of the professional growers and will pick them up when the weather permits. "That was probably our best workshop," Jenell says. "People were saying on social media, 'When's your next one?' I definitely feel that workshops are the up-and-coming trend."

Jon Neff, Bob's Market & Greenhouses, Mason, West Virginia

Moneymaker No. 1: Growing your own product

Moneymaker No. 2: Fertilizer

Jon takes the same stance as A.J. Petitti regarding in-house grown material: It's where the money is, hands down. Especially when you grow and sell 4-in. annuals. "If you look at it from a grower standpoint, your greenhouse is your limitation," Jon says. "We're getting roughly \$30 for a flat of 4 -in. compared to a flat of 804s, which is \$15-16. Definitely 4-in are our most valuable square footage item that we grow."

Bob's Market also takes the opportunity to help their customers be successful by explaining how to use fertilizer to create the same lush and beautiful baskets Bob's grows. And it all comes down to Jack's Classic from Peter's. Peter's has a fertilizer packet that hangs onto hanging basket hooks. Jon explains they attach these free packets onto every hanging basket they sell through Mother's Day. "That boosts our sales on fertilizer for the following weeks to come," Jon explains. "People see a huge impact on what that fertilizer does and the quality of the plants. It's very simple to use, and it keeps the customer coming back once they run out.

They also have a tank of this same fertilizer available to customers who want to fill up empty milk jugs—for free. Is it harder to sell if you give it away? "I think what it does is it gets people hooked on it," Jon explains. "They can see the difference. They realize it's a lot easier and more convenient to make the fertilizer at home so they buy it. I don't see gallons of it leaving at a time, but a few milk containers. I think it helps us in the long run. Plus, it increases our average sale." **GP**