

THE NEXT WAVE

of plant consumers

As new immigrants and younger generations become established, so too do their purchase interests in the floriculture sector.

BY DR. ALEXANDRA GRYGORCZYK

As a new and more ethnically diverse wave of Canadian consumers set up households, their plant purchasing habits are causing shifts in the floriculture sector.

New Canadians are bringing plant traditions from their home countries, creating opportunities for new products and marketing campaigns focused around ethnic holidays.

Meanwhile, the younger generation of Canadians is trying their hand at plant care as they set up homes of their own. Many younger consumers welcome technology and social media in all aspects of their lives, and plant care is no exception. Both of these demographic shifts have created opportunities for the floriculture sector to consider, so they can better meet the needs of a changing consumer base.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SHIFT

Canada is experiencing a shift in ethnic demographics, particularly in urban centres. As of 2017, visible minorities account for the majority (51.5 per cent) of the population in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), with 35 per cent identifying themselves as Asian-Canadian. South Asians, originating from countries such as India, Pakistan or Bangladesh account for the largest group (13 per cent) followed by Chinese (11 per cent) and Filipino (6 per cent) in the GTA.

According to research conducted by Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, 81 to 91 per cent of surveyed Asian-Canadians wish that flowers from their country of origin would be more easily available in Canada. Among Asian consumers, plant traditions differ by region of origin and religious affiliation. Despite the wide variation in traditions, a few plants were common across many Asian and Middle Eastern groups.

Jasmine sambac, in particular, is a plant that holds a special place in the hearts of many Asian and Middle Eastern Canadians. Although the plant has a questionable appearance by Western standards – due to its lanky architecture, light green foliage and petite white flowers – the fragrance is what makes this plant sing. Many of our Asian-Canadian study participants emphatically expressed that jasmine sambac's heavenly scent triggers strong

feelings of nostalgia and is a cherished reminder of their home country. However, be warned, not just any jasmine will do. This demographic is very particular about the cultivar of jasmine sambac. Just by looking at photographs of different cultivars, which to an untrained eye may all look like similar white flowers, many Asian-Canadians in our studies were quick to identify the most fragrant ones and indicate a hierarchy of desirability among the cultivars. Grand Duke of Tuscany, sometimes colloquially called 'rose jasmine', takes the top spot followed by Mysore Mulli and Arabian Nights or Maid of Orleans.

Production trials led by Dr. Chevonne Dayboll, greenhouse floriculture specialist at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, demonstrated that jasmine sambac can fit well

within the Ontario floriculture production cycle and costs around \$5 to grow a six-inch pot containing three cuttings. However, in-store market tests showed that the plant can sell for up to \$20. Being a tropical plant, jasmine thrives in the high light and high heat conditions of a greenhouse in the summer, as well as in early fall when many greenhouses are operating below capacity. Plants will also be ready in time for Diwali, one of the most significant South Asian holidays of the year

Other plants that were found to be highly sought after included lotus, plumeria and African marigold.



PHOTO: C. DAYBOLL

ABOVE
Jasmine sambac (Maid of Orleans)

THE BROADER CONSUMER BASE

Across our studies on Canadian plant consumers, we noticed an emerging

theme: one of the largest deterrents to purchasing plants is a consumer's fear of killing them. Intuition suggests that when people kill plants, they will buy more to replace the ones they've lost. However, the reality is that consumers are more likely to become discouraged and decide they're not a "plant person". In fact, our research showed that those who spend the most money on plants also have the most plant care knowledge. Simply put, the more capable people are at keeping plants alive, the more plants they buy.

So what does the average consumer know about plant care?

We asked 662 Canadian plant purchasers about their indoor plant care routines, and here are a few examples of what we learned. Nearly half of respondents watered their plants irrespective of the plants' soil moisture, with 38 per cent watering after a set period of time and according to a routine. Another 9 per cent watered whenever they remembered. Interestingly, 59 per cent said they watered their potted plants with tap water, and 31 per cent never fertilized. Considering these responses, it's not

surprising that our research showed approximately 70 per cent of Canadian plant purchasers have little plant care knowledge, correctly answering only three or fewer of eight basic garden plant care questions, such as when to plant spring-blooming bulbs.

Another trend we noticed was that younger consumers were more likely to have low plant care knowledge. Millennials, born between 1978 and 2000, make up the largest segment in the work force. Many are now renting or

buying homes and have the opportunity to decorate with plants. What is particularly exciting about this tech-savvy group is that for the past two years, plants have been actively trending on social media. Many fashion brands have even posted Instagram photos just depicting houseplants without a single item of clothing in sight. While we have their attention, now is the perfect time to invest in sustaining their interest by helping younger consumers care for their plants.

Learning to care for plants is challenging, and flooding consumers with an onslaught of wordy booklets is likely not the most effective way to entice learning. The technology industry goes to great lengths to create intuitive, user-friendly designs so users can overcome the learning curve of mobile and web platforms without reading a manual. In the same way, the green industry can help consumers by promoting products that make plant care easier to figure out without studying the subject. Moisture meters, light meters and self-watering pots, as well as mobile apps that help identify plants and act as a forum for plant troubleshooting, are just a few examples. Another interesting solution is the very inexpensive Xiaomi plant sensor that can be placed into any indoor pot and sends data on light levels, soil moisture and fertility to a mobile app. The key is to put these tools in front of consumers where they will stumble upon them. For example, retailers may highlight these products in a consolidated plant care simplifying section, in a prominent spot distinct from the basic plant care essentials like fertilizers and watering cans. The sector can also initiate a campaign to advertise nuggets of plant care information through online advertising.

It is undeniable that the floriculture consumer is evolving; the good news is that we have their attention. Whether it is newcomers to Canada looking for a nostalgic dose of plants from their home country or tech-savvy younger consumers searching for the perfect plant décor to post on their Instagram, new opportunities are coming our way. To secure our investment among the next wave of consumers, we need to help them succeed with plant care and foster a love of plants for years to come.

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The advertisement features a background image of a large greenhouse structure with a white frame and translucent panels. In the center, the word "Westland" is written in a large, bold, blue sans-serif font, with a simple black outline of a house roof above it. Below "Westland", the words "GREENHOUSE SOLUTIONS" are written in a smaller, blue, all-caps sans-serif font. A dark grey horizontal band across the middle contains the text "Westland Greenhouse Solutions specializes in making your greenhouse project easy." in white. Below this band, a list of services is provided under the heading "We offer:". The bottom of the advertisement is a solid blue horizontal band containing the website "westlandgs.com" in white, followed by the company name "Westland Greenhouse Solutions" and contact information: "4029 11th St, St. Catharines, ON L2R 6P9" and "Phone: 905-685-0578 | sales@westlandgs.com".

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