

# 5 Things You Need To Know About Young Plant Buyers

Michigan State University's Bridget Behe and Meister Media's Carol Miller listened to three groups of consumers to find out how they view their relationship with their yards and plants.

by Dr. Bridget Behe and Carol Miller

Young garden consumers think it's important for children to learn how to grow plants, even though they themselves see gardening as a time-consuming and expensive hobby, our latest research shows.

This insight was just one of many unearthed by Flowers Canada (Ontario) as it seeks ways to increase consumer interest in plants and local garden centers. We conducted three focus groups made up of consumers less than 50 years of age during the late winter of 2015. These focus groups took place over three days.

The first focus group was made up of 18-29 year olds, the second of 30-49 year olds and the third of parents with children between 2 and 12 years of age.

Our next steps are to develop marketing campaigns based on issues our research revealed. Then during spring of 2016, we plan to roll out the marketing campaigns with garden centres and measure the results.

You may recall *Today's Garden Center* conducted similar research in 2014. That research, funded by a grant from the Ohio Department of Agriculture, took place entirely in Ohio. This year's research, funded by Flowers Canada (Ontario), took place in Ontario, Canada.

Out of the hundreds of pages of transcripts, here are the themes that most caught our attention.

## **It's Uncomfortable Feeling Ignorant**

Most participants saw themselves as novices when it comes to plant knowledge. Even those who saw themselves as average were insecure. There's an arcane feel about plant knowledge, making it mysterious and intimidating.

Slightly more than half (33 out of 61) saw themselves as novices, while 22 viewed themselves as average. The comparison was made to friends and neighbors, which was primarily the reason so many of them indicated they were average.

That sense of ignorance undermines younger consumers' sense of ownership when it comes to gardening. They aren't typical gardeners, because that group of people is generally older, and have lots of time to understand the mysteries of plants. Even those who rated themselves as having average skill levels at gardening didn't think they knew enough to advise anyone.

There's an underlying tone that plants are being threatened with death at all times, and their meager knowledge does just barely enough to hold off a yard full of brown, brittle shrubs and vegetables.

"I know all the basics, and have had experience gardening all my life," says one participant, Rachel S., who is in the 18-29 year-old group, "but would not really be able to give anyone tips or anything. I don't have any gardening secrets. I don't know the small details that can help a gardener, but I know enough to have a successful garden."

Jeff B., who's in the 30-49 year-old group, sums up the effect this sense of ignorance has: "I just buy what I think looks nice and isn't too expensive and won't die if I forget to water it for a few days."

## **Yes, Online Research Is A Big Deal. But So Is Trusted Real-World Advice**

The conventional wisdom that today's customers are researching everything online was born out by our group of consumers. Yet the Internet isn't the last word. Many turn to older relatives for advice about as often as they turn to the Internet.

Understanding this generational mix will be key to attracting new customers to local garden stores.

Even when a family member offers advice, online research is standard. The family member's advice is trusted, but our participants want to learn more about what they are about to take on.

Immediate family influenced nearly all of the participants in our study, primarily the mother (22 mentions). Second was the father, with 13 mentions; these would include both respondents that listed either parent or said "parents." The other family members who influenced the first gardening experiences of our panel were grandmother (5), grandfather (3), sister (1), wife (2), children (2) and brother (1). Clearly, the female influence was substantially larger than the male influence.

Cheryl H. wrote, “When I was a kid, Dad built raised garden plots and grew tomatoes, peppers and corn. My grandparents had rhubarb, raspberries and apple trees in their backyard. The first things I ever grew on my own were tomatoes, in pots on the deck of my apartment. I chose them because I like tomatoes and they’re easy to grow.”

## **Food Gardening Is Almost As Common As Flower Gardening**

It’s no surprise that our group said food is a big reason gardening holds any attraction for them. (But don’t rule out beauty as a motivator just yet — it still outpaced food as to why they buy the plants they do. Beauty was mentioned 27 times while food was mentioned 19 times.)

One reason food holds appeal is that it gives younger gardeners a sense of accomplishment.

Here’s what Minh L., a Gen Y (18-29 year olds) participant, said about food gardening: “I generally like to know how to do ... well, everything. So being able to grow my own food and become more self-sufficient has made me look more deeply into gardening. I like to experiment with different seeds to see what grows, even if I have no idea what I’m doing.”

One mom, Angela L., was even more enthusiastic about what she saw as the payoff to food gardening: “The glory of the harvest and enjoying the fruits of your labor!”

As expected, health concerns are another driver of food gardening.

“Now I do more research into what plants I can grow myself so that I can control what goes into the foods that I eat. It has led to a healthier lifestyle,” another 18-29 year old, Michele D. said.

The Gen X (30-49 year olds) group, and the parents group expressed the same sentiment. The need for knowing where healthy food comes from is widely held.

Beauty and food were the two key themes that emerged in the focus group with regard to the best aspects of gardening. Kevin R. said, “I ate the peas and carrots we grew last year, as well as the potatoes. If you can eat what you grow, it is a major success.”

## **Outdoor Tasks Are Annoying**

Our 2015 focus group saw gardening as time consuming and hard work, which is a repeat of what we learned with our 2014 groups.

For most, gardening was seen as a chore, and many assumed that those who like doing it have the luxury of time, space and income.

That said, the same people also see gardening as healthy and as a way to connect with nature.

S.N., a parent, summed up many of their sentiments: “Unfortunately, I don’t have lots of time to invest in maintaining a decent garden. Having a dog also makes gardening a challenge. However, having the vegetable garden is a great pleasure that we look forward to planting every summer.”

The culprit? The appeal of modern technology.

“People my age can’t pry their eyes from their cellphones for a meal, let alone long enough to tend a garden,” said a Gen Y participant, Megan C. “Others generally feel it is way too much work, and not worth the reward. Or lack thereof if it fails.”

Lack of time (12), hard work (9) and dirt/dirty (7) were the most often cited downsides. Some found gardening boring (4), for hippies (2) or those who were/are obsessed (1) or older (1). The problems were the weather (2), pests (3), frustration in general (2), weeding (2), expensive (2), caused one to be scheduled/tied-down (2) or gave the person too much sun (3) or aches/pains (3).

That can have a major impact on how plants and gardening are viewed if something goes wrong. If you love a task, the occasional failure is only a hiccup. But if you approach a task with a sense of uncertainty and thinking it’s a chore, failure has an outsized impact.

“I once helped plant shrubs at my grandmother’s, but after a month or so, some of the shrubs started to die for no apparent reason. We ended up removing them and replacing them with new ones which fared much better. It was frustrating because it was expensive and time consuming to replace them,” said Jason S., who was in the 18-29 year-old group.

A parent, Frank T., told a similar story, with more emotion: “I planted a Japanese maple tree about five years ago. After the ice storm last year, the maple tree was dead. I felt so sad, as this was the first major purchase I made on a tree. It was so beautiful for the last five years. I miss my tree.”

In the video game era, when fun activities have a predictable — and fast — outcome, the variable results of gardening can come as an affront.

“I don’t like that it can be unpredictable,” said Rachel S., a Gen Y participant. “Like, you can do everything right and it’s not guaranteed that a plant will survive or thrive. I am also not very patient, so it is difficult for me to wait the long time it takes for most plants to grow to fruition. I get so excited and want to check on them at least twice a day, only to find no change.

“I also don’t have too much time on my hands to properly care for plants, which is why I have been resorting to lower-maintenance plants in the last few years — house plants I can water every so often, leave on a good shelf in view and in sunlight and just enjoy them being there. I don’t think I can minimize any of these aspects because they are least-liked by me only because they are out of my control. I can’t do anything to change them and that’s what frustrates me.”

Kevin R. made an insightful comment: “It is a lot of work. Watering, weeding, digging the garden beds, etc. It takes up a lot of time and effort. And if I had any suggestions on how to get around these aspects, I would be doing them, not talking about them.”

## **Adults Want Kids To Experience Gardening As A Life Lesson**

Ironically, despite the negative feedback many participants gave on their own gardening habits and attitudes, nearly everyone agreed that it is a good idea to get children involved in gardening.

“Parents should involve their children in these activities because most kids don’t grow up enjoying gardening, which is mostly because they weren’t exposed to it in their childhood,” said Jenny C., a Gen Y participant. “If they grow up learning up gardening, chances are they will partake in these activities too when they grow up.”

Vanessa M. added: “It gives children a hobby and gets them outside instead of sitting inside watching TV. It also gives you time to bond with them when you teach them how to garden.”

The gardening activity for kids mentioned most often was growing (21 mentions), but letting children help with watering (6), picking/harvesting (4) and digging (3) were also specifically mentioned. Five people mentioned that they wanted to use the garden to inspire their children, and two mentioned teaching responsibility.

Eating the bounty was a popular benefit for kids, mentioned by 10 participants. A few (3) mentioned that it was dirty (which may appeal to some children) or that children could be helpful in weeding (2) while a few others (3) said it was a good way to get their children outdoors.

"It is a good way to spend time with the kids and get them away from the Xbox and PlayStation," Michael R. said.

S.N said it's important her children experience the full cycle of growth and harvest: "When we have our vegetable garden, it's a family affair. We always start the plants from seeds, so from the get-go our daughter is actively involved in the process. Doing veggies also gives kids more opportunities to be involved in looking after the plants, and in terms of finished product, there's nothing better than being able to eat what you've grown."

### Next Steps In This Research Project

The marketing firm, Eberly & Collard, has reviewed the results of our research, and will be working with the volunteer garden retailers in crafting marketing campaigns that will resonate with younger consumers.

**Please contact Jamie Aalbers at Flowers Canada (Ontario) ([jamie@fco.on.ca](mailto:jamie@fco.on.ca)) if you would like to be sent the full analysis of the focus groups and what our participants had to say about where they shop, why they shop at the current stores and what it would take to get them into a garden centre. Within the report are the five marketing campaigns developed which will be tested at 3 to 4 garden centres in Ontario this spring. Access to these campaign ideas is open to any FCO member who requests the report. Results from the field trials will be shared with FCO members in the fall of 2016.**

## The Emotional Side Of Gardening

We gathered the comments that revealed our participants' most heartfelt thoughts on gardening.

"Plants to me represent life, new beginning, and you appreciate nature more. It makes the house and yard more appealing and full of life!" [Justin J.](#)

"Best gardening experience? I would have to say an aloe vera plant. It grew so beautiful and at the time my mother was very ill and with her illness she had a lot of pain. We used this plant for her and she actually felt better when we used it on her. This was one of my mom's favourite plants. It sticks in my head every day remembering her soft soul. That is what this plant does to me every time I see it." [Barbara L.](#)

"I find plants make homes feel more welcoming and fresh. I like having plants in all public areas and my office. Gardening gives me a sense of accomplishment because if your plants grow, you feel like you successfully created and maintained life." [Monica M.](#)

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