

The Changing Garden Paradigm: Perceptions of One Extension Agent

Gary R. Bachman

Mississippi State University, Coastal Research and Extension Center, 1815 Poppo Ferry Road, Biloxi, Mississippi 39532, USA

Gary.bachman@msstate.edu

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Summary

There is increased interest in gardening, vegetables, and sustainably grown product with today's consumers. Consumers want smaller garden footprints, such as container growing, in their more confined patios and balconies. The gardening consumer wants to grow some of their own food but are concerned with food

security and production. The modern gardener wants recommendations, which includes social media, workshops, garden shows and festivals. To maintain market share, the green industry needs to address the shifting perceptions and expectations of the modern gardener.

INTRODUCTION

During the past 20 years that I have been involved in urban and consumer horticulture -I have noticed a shift towards increasing landscape and garden interest. Data collected by the National Initiative for Consumer Horticulture (<https://consumerhort.org/>) suggests that interest in vegetable gardening has in-

creased 17% (2014-2019). Much of this is being driven by the 63% increase in the 18 to 34 demographics – the millennials!

But the modern gardener has constraints that gardeners from previous eras did not encounter. Among these constraints are having jobs outside of the home and perceived garden labor requirements. There is also a shift in garden size. The modern urban

gardens have smaller footprints, restricted by ever decreasing house lot sizes.

Much of this increased interest is from new, younger gardeners who tend to be more highly educated and digitally connected. They want what they perceive to be simple pleasures past gardeners experienced and enjoyed. But they don't want those big gardens. Container growing is highly attractive - especially considering the smaller garden footprints, maybe having only a patio or balcony.

The new gardening consumer wants to grow some of their own food and is worried about food security and production. They want organically grown, but are not interested in an organic food religious experience. They want locally grown food and want to know where their food comes from. With much of the food supply being transported long distances, any news of disruptions (weather, disease, etc.) is a concern - especially in large cities where food has to be shipped in every day.

The sources in which the modern gardener gets their information changing. It used to be the Home & Garden Television (HGTV) was the go-to source. But what happen to the "Garden" in HGTV? Looking at the show lineup for the past 10 years, there has been a steady influx of home remodeling, home flipping and real estate shows at the expense of gardening. Any mention of gardening is only a tiny fraction across all the current shows.

So, where do the modern gardeners get their information? This digital gardening generation is also looking towards social media. Social media is a wonderful vehicle to get information out quickly to a wide swath of the gardening public. But it is also organically propagates misinformation just as quickly.

These gardeners like to go directly to the source. There has been an increase workshops, garden shows, and festivals that are asking the garden and landscape influencers to be speakers. And the attendance of these events of increasing every year, giving attendees the opportunity to interact with experts.

Consumers do not want to plant on a trial and error basis. The modern gardener wants recommendations. This feeds into the expansion of branded plants. From national programs like Proven Winners and First Editions to state programs like the Mississippi Medallion Winners and Louisiana Super Plants.

This means that if the horticulture industry wants to keep market share and customers -then addressing the changing and shifting perceptions and expectations of the modern gardener should be of primary concern.

Disclaimer

This presentation is not based on any actual data, but from my interactions addressing gardening questions and face-to-face interactions in my role as an Extension agent.