

# Marketing Easy-Care Perennials and Herbs

*Tips to help garden center operators sell more of these popular plants*

*By Ellen Vincent Strother*



Ellen Vincent Strother

Perennials and herbs are becoming more popular with today's home gardeners. Garden center operators can increase their sales of these plants by making it easy for customers to purchase and successfully grow them.

Over the past 10 years, I have cared for, and marketed, perennials and herbs at several garden centers. At each garden center, I tried to help customers have gardening success stories by creating effective plant displays; using informational signs; providing knowledgeable, well-trained salespeople; and offering gardening classes.

Today, I own Lavenderwood Herbary, a horticultural consulting company in St. Joseph, MO. As a horticultural consultant, I specialize in garden center design, layout and education, using many of the same marketing techniques I used while working at the garden centers. Let's take a look at each of these:

Displaying perennials and herbs is simple. I organized display areas so that all sun-loving plants were in one section, all shade-loving plants in another and all herbs in yet another. Plants that tolerated both sun and shade, or that could be at home in either a perennial or herb garden, went in both areas, if there was room.

Most herbs prefer full sun, so I saved the sunniest spot for them. However, a few, such as pennyroyal and sweet woodruff, require shade. To protect these tender plants, I constructed burlap tents over the flats or, if I was in a hurry, set them beneath tables.

Whenever possible, I kept annuals and perennials in separate areas. If I worked at a garden center that wasn't sure if its customers wanted perennials, I placed these plants where people had to walk by them to get to high-demand items, like hanging baskets or impatiens.

I made sure big signs indicating which plants are sun-loving perennials, shade-





*Left: Malva alcea 'Fastigiata' is a graceful perennial with rich pink flowers and dark green leaves that resemble those of perennial geranium.*

*Opposite page: The silvery foliage and clear blue flowers of Perovskia atriplicifolia add a "cooling" effect to the garden.*

## Low-Maintenance Perennials

Most of my customers want low-maintenance plants and think perennials are easier to grow than annuals. To prevent misunderstandings, I define low-maintenance perennials as plants that:

- Don't need staking under normal conditions.
- Have foliage that stays attractive all growing season.
- Are winter-hardy for my area (Zone 5).
- Are less susceptible to insect infestations or diseases.
- Do not need to be divided more than every three years when planted in moderately fertile soil.

I have posted a large sign with these criteria near the perennial-display area so that customers and employees can refer to them when discussing these plants.

Below are descriptions of three of my best-selling low-maintenance perennials: *Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam', *Hosta sieboldiana* 'Frances Williams' and *Perovskia atriplicifolia*. I have listed two additional perennials that sell well if marketed properly: *Iris sibirica* 'Caesar's Brother' and *Malva alcea* 'Fastigiata'.

*Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam' ('Moonbeam' threadleaf coreopsis) is 2 feet tall and 18 to 24 inches wide, and produces an abundance of long-lasting, creamy yellow blooms in summer. Its fine, delicately textured foliage lends an excellent "airy" effect to the garden. This plant also makes a superb ground cover or a foreground plant in perennial beds.

'Moonbeam' exhibits good drought tolerance and should be divided every three years. It is hardy in zones 3 to 10 and requires full sun.

*Hosta sieboldiana* 'Frances Williams' ('Frances Williams' hosta) grows 2 to 2½ feet tall and 2½ to 3½ feet wide. Its tall flower stalks hold small, lavender bells above large, blue-green foliage with a bold, irregular gold edge. The flowers appear in early summer.

'Frances Williams' is easy to grow and forms large

clumps that may be divided every three years (or more often, if desired). It is excellent in groups, as a specimen in shady gardens or as a ground cover under trees. In addition, it can be used to provide contrast in low, ever-green ground cover beds. This cultivar is hardy in zones 3 to 9 and prefers shade.

*Perovskia atriplicifolia* (Russian sage) grows 3 to 5 feet tall and 24 inches wide. Clear blue blooms that appear in summer to late summer and fragrant foliage covered with silvery gray hairs make this perennial ideal for use in the center or back of a perennial garden, in groups or as a specimen (photo, opposite page).

Hardy in zones 5 to 10, Russian sage is easy to grow and should be cut back to the ground before new growth starts in spring. It prefers full sun.

*Iris sibirica* 'Caesar's Brother' ('Caesar's Brother' Siberian iris) grows 3 feet tall and 18 to 24 inches wide. Its deep purple blooms, which I think are more graceful than those of bearded irises, appear in early summer. The narrow foliage remains attractive throughout the growing season.

Easy to grow, 'Caesar's Brother' exhibits good disease and pest resistance, and should be divided every three years. It combines well with pink-flowering plants, shrubs or other perennials. It is hardy in zones 4 to 10 and requires full sun.

*Malva alcea* 'Fastigiata' ('Fastigiata' mallow) attains a height of 3 feet and a width of 15 to 18 inches. A neat, tidy, graceful perennial, 'Fastigiata' offers rich pink flowers that bloom from summer to fall and dark green leaves that resemble those of perennial geranium (photo, above). It provides a good vertical accent in the garden and combines well with baby's breath and Siberian iris.

An easy-to-grow, sun-loving perennial, 'Fastigiata' exhibits excellent disease and pest resistance, and needs to be divided every three to four years.



loving perennials, annual herbs or perennial herbs were visible from all entrances. These signs enabled employees to direct customers to a specific group of plants without personally escorting them there.

I placed potted plants on waist-high tables rather than on the ground or on pallets. This makes shopping easier for customers and maintenance easier for employees. Bare-root wildflowers and ferns were set in flats of mulch and misted twice a day.

To speed up stocking and customer assistance, I organized plants in each area alphabetically by botanical name. Some employees preferred organizing plants by common name, but I stuck with the Latin name because most plants have several common names but only one botanical name.

We lined up plants in straight rows on the tables, from front to back, leaving a few inches of space between varieties. One drawback to this method was that, during

busy weekends, when we had so much stock on hand that we needed to pack pots tightly together, I noticed more plant damage. This occurred when customers removed plants from the back of the rows.

Because displaying attractive, healthy plants was a priority, I employed people as "groomers." Groomers spent their time removing dead leaves and spent flowers, watering and fertilizing, spotting insects, retagging plants, straightening merchandise, and sweeping spilled soil from the tables.

I recorded the name and retail price of all plant losses on an easy-to-reach clipboard. I also recorded plants used in display beds. Any and every plant removed from the sales area for any reason other than a purchase was considered a loss — even if it ended up in our "plant infirmary" and, eventually, back on the sales table.

I consulted this list at the end of the year and before placing the following year's

orders. One year, I lost a lot of herbs in 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch pots. So the following year, I ordered herbs in 4-inch pots and had fewer losses. My best season was when sales of herbaceous plants equaled those of woody plants.

I kept certain tie-in items, such as recommended soil amendments and fertilizers, near the plant-display area. Most people will pay higher prices for these products at a garden center for the convenience of one-stop shopping.

I prefer large displays of clearly priced merchandise with signs above them listing the products' benefits. For instance, above a display of bone meal, I hung signs that said: "Long-lasting natural fertilizer to mix in soil at planting time. Recommended by botanical-garden horticulturists." This sign repeats information frequently found on plant-information cards but adds an endorsement — a new twist to make the salesperson's job easier.

I found that other low-cost

tie-in items, such as plastic and metal plant labels, permanent markers, fertilizers (particularly those intended for use at planting time) and educational booklets, sold best if placed near the register because customers frequently ask the cashier about them at the last minute.

If clearly priced and visible to people waiting to check out, these products practically sell themselves.

Sundials, beehouses and statuary (including bird-baths) are also good tie-in items for perennial and herb gardeners and were situated near the plant-display area.

While an organized and well-maintained display area was an important factor in selling perennials and herbs at the garden centers where I worked, the key to high sales was signage. I hung signs with the following vital statistics above all my herbs and perennials: botanical name, common name, hardiness zone, mature height and width, flowering time, sun and soil requirements, and cultural tips. I also indicated whether a plant was low-maintenance.

In addition, I frequently included information about recommended products or culture. For example, most low-maintenance perennials prefer well-drained soil. Because I lived in an area with heavy clay soils, I typically added the following information to my signs: "Prefers well-drained soil. Add coarse sand and organic matter (peat moss, humus or compost) to clay soil at planting time."

For cultural information, I wrote, "Add bone meal and kelp to soil at planting time for long-lasting natural fertilizer. Mulch to conserve soil moisture and reduce weeds."

Vinyl signs written in permanent ink were best, as they stood up to wear from light and water. I was unable to find preprinted vinyl signs with the informational



Ellen Vincent Struther





Left: *Alchemilla mollis* has soft gray-green leaves that make it ideal for use in borders and as a ground cover.

Opposite page: *Pulmonaria saccharata* 'Mrs. Moon' has blue-green foliage with silver splotches.

## Spectacular Herbs

People define "herbs" in a variety of ways. I usually define an herb as any plant that is, or historically has been, used in medicine, cooking, crafts, cosmetics or fragrances.

I avoid recommending herbs for specific uses because much of the herb lore falls into the "historical folklore" category and, being a transplanted New Yorker, I worry about lawsuits. Instead, I simply write "culinary," "historical medicinal," "dried flower" or "aromatic" on my herb signs.

I always indicate if a plant is poisonous and should not be eaten, as is the case with many of the artemisias. This type of information can be found in technical books, by consulting a horticulturist or through a cooperative extension office.

Below are three of my best-selling plants. *Allium tuberosum* and *Echinacea purpurea* can be classified as herbs or perennials. *Pelargonium graveolens* is a tender perennial. I have also listed three additional herbs or perennials that sell well if marketed properly: *Alchemilla mollis*, *Pulmonaria saccharata* 'Mrs. Moon' and *Teucrium chamaedrys*.

*Allium tuberosum* (garlic chives) grows 12 to 18 inches tall and 12 to 15 inches wide, and produces white, starlike blooms in summer. Its aromatic, flat, 1/4-inch-wide foliage does not smell like garlic unless touched.

Hardy in zones 3 to 10, garlic chives is a wonderful plant for the front of perennial borders or for herb gardens, as well as in sunny areas. It also serves as a good ground cover for sunny banks. In the kitchen, garlic chives is frequently used in salads, soups, sauces and stews. The flowers may also be used in salads. Green seed heads are used in garlic vinegar.

*Echinacea purpurea* (purple cone flower) attains a height of 2 to 5 feet and a width of 18 to 24 inches. In summer, it bears pinkish purple daisylike flowers that reflex backwards to expose brown central disks.

This easy-to-grow plant is drought-resistant and should be divided every three to four years. It is ideal in the middle or back of sunny perennial beds, combines well with ornamental grasses and attracts butterflies. The roots of this excellent cut flower are often used in

migraine medicines. Purple cone flower is hardy in zones 3 to 10.

*Pelargonium graveolens* (rose-scented geranium) grows 12 to 24 inches tall and 24 inches wide. It produces pink flowers in summer and has aromatic foliage, which can be dried for use in potpourri. Plants should be placed in groups of three or more in the landscape.

This tender, easy-to-grow perennial is hardy in zones 9 and 10, and it prefers sun. In cold areas, plants should be brought indoors before frost.

*Alchemilla mollis* (lady's mantle) grows 1 to 2 feet tall and 18 inches wide. In shady areas, its chartreuse flowers bloom in spring; in sunny sites, they appear on and off throughout summer. The soft gray-green leaves unfold like little accordions and attractively display water droplets (photo, above).

Hardy in zones 3 to 9, lady's mantle exhibits good insect and disease resistance. Moderately self-seeding, it is ideal for use in the front of borders and as a ground cover. It also makes an excellent cut or dried flower.

*Pulmonaria saccharata* 'Mrs. Moon' ('Mrs. Moon' lungwort) attains a height of 10 to 12 inches and a width of 18 to 24 inches. In spring, this cultivar bears pink nodding blooms that turn blue as they age. Its blue-green foliage with silver splotches seems to lighten dark areas in the landscape (photo, opposite).

This easy-to-grow, long-lived herb or perennial exhibits good disease and pest resistance and is hardy in zones 3 to 9. It prefers partial to dense shade. Because it blooms in spring, 'Mrs. Moon' should be divided in fall. It is called lungwort because early physicians thought the spotted leaves resembled diseased lungs.

*Teucrium chamaedrys* (germander) grows 12 to 24 inches tall and wide. Purple flowers that appear in summer and tiny, deep green leaves resembling evergreen boxwood make germander an excellent edging plant or a low hedge. It also looks attractive cascading over a stone wall, and it attracts butterflies.

In addition, germander is easy to grow and prune, and exhibits good disease and pest resistance. It is hardy in zones 5 to 10 and prefers sun. Historically, doctors have used it to treat gout.

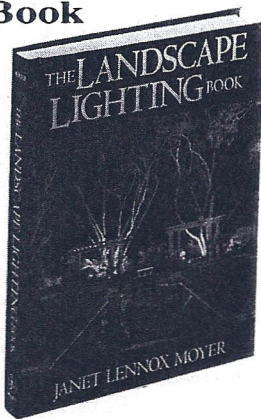


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categories I wanted, so I designed my own and had them printed by Economy Label Sales Inc. in Daytona Beach, FL.

I attached a color photo of each plant to, or near, its corresponding sign. I tried to keep the pictures small and as realistic-looking as possible. Sometimes, I cut pictures out of magazines and catalogs, and laminated them to the signs.

I also purchased vinyl picture cards from some of the large wholesale nurseries. However, I tried to buy the smallest cards available due to cost and because the information they provided was too generic for my geographic area and customer base.

Though I hung signs in a variety of ways, my favorite method was to string a wire or cord tightly above the plants and attach the corresponding signs with clothespins. This enabled me to quickly rearrange signs each time I shifted plants.

A detailed signage system serves as a silent salesperson. Signs provide most of the information a salesperson needs. They help inexperienced employees sound like experts. They allow customers to help themselves when salespeople are busy — or to shop in solitude, if they so desire. Signs help sell plants that are not in bloom. They educate customers and may help them have a success-

ful gardening experience, which frequently translates into repeat sales and referrals.

Another important factor in selling perennials and herbs is the price tag. I'm a firm believer that every item available for sale should bear a marked price. I know that, when I'm making an impulse buy, I won't take the time to find a salesperson to give me the price of an item. And garden centers shouldn't expect their customers to, either.

Pricing thousands of plants at once is often a problem, however. My solution was to write prices in permanent ink on inexpensive craft sticks (Popsicle sticks). The cashiers removed the sticks at the register, thus speeding up their job and allowing me to reuse the sticks for incoming plants.

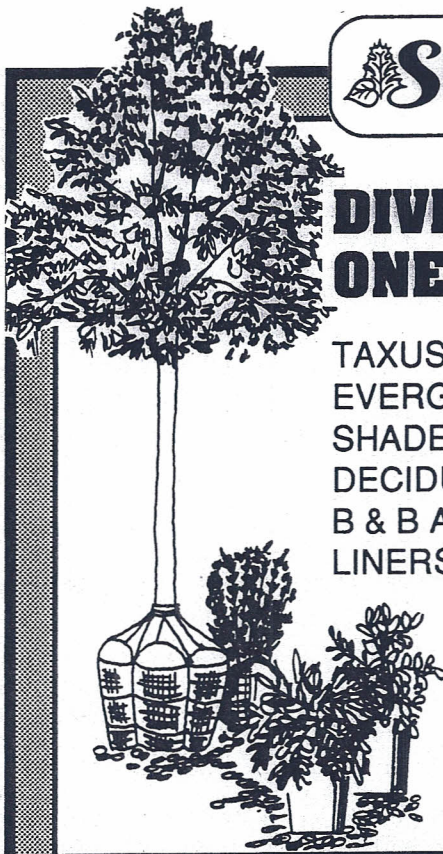
Because many people love to buy new arrivals and would bypass fully stocked tables to pull plants from flats in the driveway or overstock area, I priced all plants as soon as they arrived. I tried to price plants according to container size, opting for quick turnover rather than a 2.2 markup (multiplying the cost of a plant by 2.2).

Overall, having a price tag on every plant encourages impulse sales, lessens employee confusion at the register and on the sales floor, promotes recycling,

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and creates an atmosphere of professionalism.

At one garden center, employees complained about customers entering an "employees only" area that contained all the unpriced back stock. I solved this problem by taking down the "employees only" sign and pricing all the plants in that area. Not only did sales increase, but employees no longer got irritated at customers who ventured into the area, and unpriced plants no longer turned up at the registers.

The only area from which I restricted customers was the "already sold" area. It was accessible only to customers picking up purchased stock with carts or cars. Customers always seem to be attracted to plants that are unavailable, so I tried to block this area from view.

I always considered a plant display to be incomplete unless every plant bore a name tag. I never wrote the plant name on the same tag as the price. And I made sure the name tag did not resemble the price tag; this kept the cashier from removing it accidentally or from having to slow down to distinguish between the two.

Customers often forget a plant's name and preferred location once they get it home. Therefore, I insisted my suppliers label every plant I bought from them —

not just the flat or one pack in a flat. I let them know that I was picky about this before I placed an order.

If a supplier showed up with unlabeled plants, I either refused the shipment or asked for a discount to compensate for the time and materials needed to label the plants. This may sound hard-nosed, but it reduced losses since I couldn't sell named and unnamed plants for the same price.

**S**uccessfully selling perennials and herbs depends not only on effective display, signage and labeling, but also on the sales abilities of a garden center's employees.

I believe it is important to give employees opportunities to learn more about the products and services they offer. Field trips and training sessions are good ways to accomplish this while increasing sales and forging a good relationship between management and employees. I find that both are best held before the season begins.

For example, one season I decided to start carrying bone meal and kelp at the garden center where I worked. I knew my staff had little, or no, previous exposure to these two products. So I decided to have all my salespeople — including

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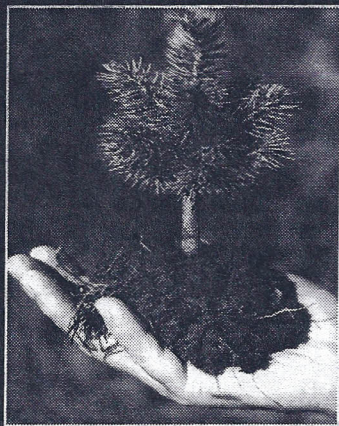
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cashiers and groomers — tour Ameri-Pac in St. Joseph, where these products were processed. The time spent on this field trip was recorded, and employees were paid for attending.

The owner of the company gave my employees a personalized tour, explained how the products were made and why they were superior to other brands, and demonstrated how they were packaged.

This tour generated several positive results. We sold a tremendous amount of bone meal and kelp that year. The employees — many of whom were new — got to meet each other before the busy season. Several even told me how impressed they were that the garden center had sponsored the event.

I also sent the employees to visit our primary perennial and annual supplier. During that tour, they got to see many of the plants we sell and, to my surprise, witnessed the grower mixing his famous secret potting soil.

In addition to sending employees on field trips, I conducted training sessions for them on herb gardening, perennial gardening, water gardening, pest control, cash-register operation, and store policies and procedures. I spent more time training employees than anyone I

know, but I felt it paid off. It results in more confident salespeople, cashiers, groomers and landscapers. I think employees also feel more loyalty to a business that invests in them. In addition, when they returned to work the next season, I didn't have to retrain them.

Through the years, I have organized many consumer gardening workshops and seminars at the garden centers where I worked. Some of the topics I covered included harvesting and using herbs, designing a perennial border, and rose gardening. Perennials and herb classes were the most popular.

These events were well-publicized, free and very successful. Attendees usually referred other people to the garden center, bought plants and products recommended during the presentations, and became loyal customers.

In addition to teaching many of these classes, I also spoke at local club and civic-group meetings about gardening. These events were great advertising. I always brought unusual or new products and plants, such as bird feeders, lemon thyme or scented geraniums.

Managing herbaceous-plant sales is much like managing anything else, I suppose. I always looked for new suppliers who had quality products at low-

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er prices. Keeping tables full of best-selling products took a certain amount of diligence (keeping an eye on inventory) and good relations with suppliers (getting them to deliver at awkward times).

Good service was a priority. When someone requested an item I was unfamiliar with, I never just said, "No, we don't carry that." I took the customer's name and telephone number and called around until I found a source.

Similarly, if a customer wanted an item the garden center was out of, I asked a competitor if he had it and if he'd hold it until the customer could pick it up. This type of customer service seemed to amaze competitors, delight customers and allow me and my employees to feel good because we had helped someone. It also promoted customer loyalty, which resulted in sales.

I sold anything and everything I could. If a customer wanted a plant from the display garden because I didn't have any on the tables, I sent someone to dig it out for them. Likewise, if a customer wanted a piece of pottery from a display and agreed to the price, it was gone. I encouraged employees to use salable items to create displays that could easily be taken apart.

If someone wanted the plants in our infirmary, I'd sell them for pennies. I'm of the philosophy that turnover is grand. I'd rather sell a plant at or below cost than see it wither in the sales yard. I don't believe in hanging onto a plant, watching its cost climb every time an employee waters, treats or moves it, until someone offers a specific price.

I know my alternative approach to stimulating sales breaks with convention. Some companies are afraid to price above or below a certain percentage markup. I priced higher or lower, depending on what I thought customers would pay.

My customers repeatedly told me my selection was the best in town, and they seemed to have a wonderful time discovering new plants. I tried to carry all the regular favorites but included new and hot items to keep customers interested. I found the only limit to selection was space. If I couldn't display a plant, I couldn't sell it.

I believe good marketing techniques make the shopping experience satisfying and enjoyable for customers, and make the selling experience more fruitful for employees. Remember, as beautiful as those plants are, they won't sell themselves.

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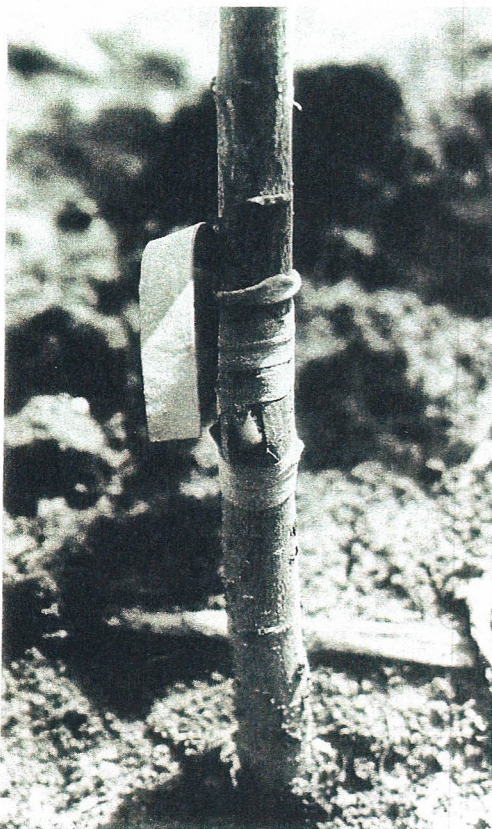
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