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How To Start a Profitable Backyard Plant Nursery

Growing What Sells

With thousands of profitable plants for the would-be grower to choose from, how do you decide what to grow? Well, despite the belief of many plant lovers that gardening & plant growing is a "higher calling", someone still has to pay the bills and, hopefully, make a profit. The secret to making a profit is to focus on the plant groups that are proven sellers – those that are in demand year after year, by retail customers, the landscapers and the garden center buyers. There are three tried and true types of plants that make sense for the new grower: Landscaping trees and shrubs, ground covers and ornamental grasses. In the pages that follow, we'll take a closer look at each of these plant specialties.

Profitable Ground Covers

![Image of blue flowers]

Ground covers can provide a grower with one of the highest per-square-foot incomes for a plant nursery. The startup costs are modest, and groundcovers are generally easy to grow, easy to market and easy to propagate.

While retail customers will pay a high price per plant for groundcovers, not all growers are fortunate enough to be located near a larger city or town. Most growers are located in remote or hard-to-find spots where land is affordable, and they sell most of their groundcover plants wholesale to retailers and larger landscapers. So don't despair if your location is off the beaten path. You'll still be able to sell groundcovers successfully.

Demand for groundcovers is increasing at a steady clip for several reasons. First, trends. These days, it's become more fashionable to stay home and fix up the house and yard. People are spending more and more to make their homes and yards a refuge from the outside world. The trend trackers call it “cocooning.”
There are also practical reasons for the growing popularity of groundcovers.

1. **Erosion control.** A dense planting of ground covers on a slope can stabilize the soil and keep it from eroding.

2. **Weed control.** The dense cover provided by many ground covers prevents the weeds from taking over.

3. **Reduced watering.** A mature planting of a ground cover such as Vinca cuts moisture loss, acting as a living mulch to prevent evaporation. This is often a necessity in water-short areas of the country.

In addition, ground covers can provide a solution to two common landscaping problems. When used instead of grass, they can eliminate grass, often paying for themselves in a year or two in reduced maintenance costs. In areas that are too shady for grass, shade loving groundcover such as vinca or winter creeper are a perfect replacement for a lawn. Ground covers also make a great transition planting between lawn and garden or between other large plants.

What is a ground cover? Ask six different gardeners, and you’ll likely get six different answers. A basic definition is any plant that creeps, clumps, mats or vines to cover the ground. This definition covers a multitude of plants, from low growing perennials like phlox to herbs like dwarf rosemary to ivies, all those plants that grow close to the ground, spread rapidly and create a dense cover.

Although there are hundreds of plants that are used as groundcovers, we’ll focus on just a few, chosen because they are popular, easy to grow and propagate, and reasonably trouble-free for both you, the grower and the consumer who plants them. Don’t think you have to grow all of these to succeed as a commercial grower. Many small growers make an excellent living just growing the “Big Four”, English Ivy, Pachysandra, Vinca and Winter Creeper.

If you’re near a large population center, visit retail nurseries to find out what’s popular, and let that guide your choice of plants. Or choose a specialty that appeals to you. One successful grower has a passion for herbs, so her ground cover nursery has row after row of Corsican mint, Lavender, Thyme and other herbs that are wholesaled to retail garden centers.
Ornamental Grasses

The grass family, Gramineae, are the most important plant family on earth, since they include the cereal grains such as barley, corn, oats, rice and wheat. Without grasses, life as we know it today would not exist.

There are over 10,000 known species of grasses, but only a few hundred of those are called “ornamental grasses” because of their exceptional color or form. Many of these have been popular for hundreds of years in Europe and Asia.

In North America, the ornamental grasses are enjoying a surge of popularity. They range in size from low-growing six inch tufts to twenty foot giants. Landscape designers love them because they can be used in so many ways – ground covers, specimen plants, in borders or near ponds and streams, as privacy screens and in rock gardens.

Several cities are using ornamental grasses for urban landscaping because they are so tolerant of air pollution and poor soil. In addition, the ornamental grasses are also being used more and more by decorators and floral designers as cut flowers and everlastings (dried flowers).

Thanks to this growing popularity, many nurseries are struggling to keep up with the demand. Ornamental grasses are ideal for the beginning grower, as few insects or diseases bother them, and you can sell your first crop in just one season.
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Best Ornamental Grasses For Landscaping

Of the hundreds of ornamental grasses, these twenty are among the most popular with landscapers and retail plant buyers. Keep in mind that there are large regional variations. For example, a grass that is popular in milder climates will not survive in colder regions.

In addition, plants become “hot”, then cool in popularity when too many landscapes feature the same plants. As you read the catalogs and web sites of the wholesale growers listed in the resource section, you’ll notice that plant breeders are producing dozens of variations within a species, so the choices continue to multiply year by year.

Pay particular attention to the hardiness information listed for the plants. If a plant is listed as being hardy in zone 6, for example, that means it will likely survive the winter in that zone, but not in colder zones. You can find your zone in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s “Hardiness Zone Map” online at: www.garden.org/zipzone or check with your local agricultural extension office.

**BLUE FESCUE – Festuca ovina glauca.** This short plant produces silver blue clumps of foliage about six to twelve inches tall. Because the foliage lasts year-round, it’s popular for ground covers and rock gardens. It’s hardy to zone 4, and prefers cooler weather. It will not do well in clay soils, and requires good drainage to thrive.

**BLUE LYME GRASS – Elymus arenarius.** Sometimes called wild rye, this is the bluest of the blue ornamental grasses. It’s tough, and spreads quickly by underground rhizomes. Because of these traits, it’s used widely for erosion control. When mature, the plants are about thirty inches tall. Hardy to zone 4.

**BULBOUS OAT GRASS – Arrhenatherum elatius bulbosum “variegatum”.** This attractive ornamental grass forms one foot tall clumps of white and green striped leaves. It’s hardy to zone 4, prefers a moist cool climate, and tolerates poor soil well.