

KEEPING UP WITH *Containers*

Capitalizing on container and pottery trends has added challenges for some IGCs this year but supplies and sales are strong.

By Jolene Hansen

Container sales at most IGCs have soared with the houseplant craze in recent years. New plant parents wanted new containers for their babies, and many plant purchases meant a pot purchase too. Then some plant owners began reusing the containers they bought and monitoring consumer

behavior along with décor trends kicked spring forecasting up a notch. But things quickly got even more complex when container and pottery supply chain issues hit.

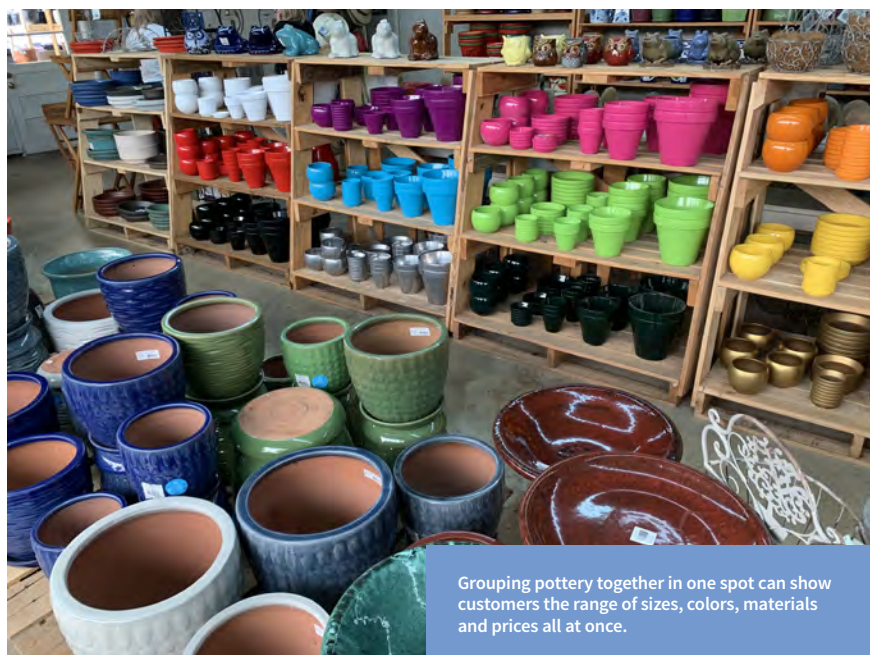
Supply chain challenges

At East Coast Garden Center (ECGC) in Sussex County, Delaware, General Manager

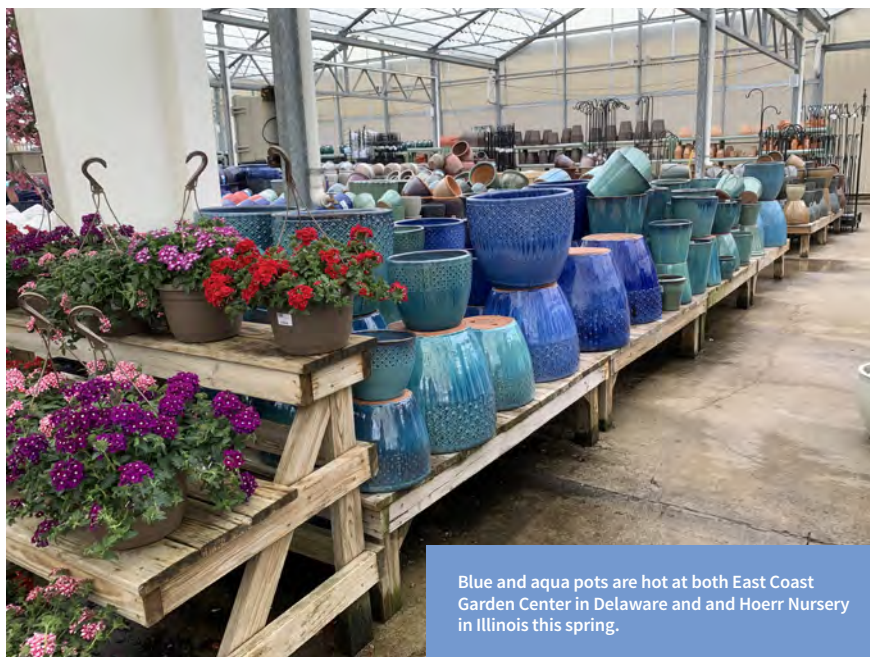
Katie Short saw strong container and pottery sales even as other IGCs saw sales even out. Short explains that the IGC is an area of heavy development near the beach, with new homes and new people moving in daily. “I think I could put a pot on every doorstep in Sussex County, and we still wouldn’t have enough pottery,” she says.

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HARD GOODS



Grouping pottery together in one spot can show customers the range of sizes, colors, materials and prices all at once.



Blue and aqua pots are hot at both East Coast Garden Center in Delaware and Hoerr Nursery in Illinois this spring.



“People moving here don’t want to lug their pottery from other places.”

Even so, Short has a new challenge this spring. “We’re inundated with pottery right now,” she says. “COVID happened to us, just like everybody else.” For ECGC, one impact was a shipment of pottery earmarked for March 2022 delivery — that finally arrived in October 2022. As Short and her staff greet spring, they still have 90 pallets of pottery on hand.

In Peoria, Illinois, almost 900 miles due west, Hoerr Nursery’s Garden Center Manager Kim Gravert went from struggling to get product to starting spring in a very similar fix. “Up until this season, since COVID started, it’s just been hard to get product, period,” Gravert says. After the Suez Canal blockage in March 2021, shipments seemed to go sideways, and recovery has been slow. “It basically has taken two years to get that straightened out.”

Last year, Gravert’s container and pottery orders — ordered in August 2021 for February 2022 delivery — came six to eight months later than expected and needed. “I do feel like as we’ve come back to work this spring, things are shipping on time now. But I went a couple years where I probably could have sold a lot more pots, but I didn’t have them to sell,” Gravert says. “We’re going into spring with a lot of the products we should have had last year.”

Both Short and Gravert hope the trends they counted on in last year’s order come through for them this year.

Colors, textures and more

Short says ECGC customers aren’t affected much by décor trends, indoors or outdoors. The IGC’s beach-area location has a lot to do with that. “Wherever people are moving from, if they’re not originally from the beach, they want beachy pottery — something ‘coastal living,’” she says. For the past six or seven years, that meant blue and white. “It’s crazy. We’re waiting for it to change, but people still want the blues. Aqua is kind of coming into play,” Short says.

Left: Supply chain issues left many IGCs without the pottery they needed last season, but those orders have come through, flooding many garden centers with an surplus of product in stock.

“YOU HAVE TO STAY IN THE KNOW. READ THE MAGAZINES. GET CONNECTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA. SEE WHAT CONSUMERS ARE TALKING ABOUT.”

— KATIE SHORT, EAST COAST GARDEN CENTER

ECGC customers prefer plain finishes, too. “We’ve dabbled in the volcanic finishes ... but our clientele doesn’t go to it,” Short says. Beach motifs like shells, turtle prints or starfish are exceptions; switch the design to diamonds or flowers, and popularity drops. Short covers all bases in container sizes. Spring sales trend toward larger outdoor pots, while smaller indoor pots stay steady all year.

Hoerr’s Illinois customers also like their blues, which may or may not relate to Peoria’s riverfront. “Blues have still been good, and aqua-blue has been strong,” Gravert says. For outdoor pots, volcanic-edged pots with lava-like rim glazes sell well.

Gravert says Hoerr’s most significant container gains have been with smaller, more unusual, indoor décor pots. “A lot of novelty stuff is selling. Head shapes and novelties like birds and animals — those have upticked a lot,” she says. Smaller pots (4- and 6-inch, up to 10-inch) comprise the category’s biggest increase the last few years.

Gravert’s customers gravitate toward ceramics, cement and volcanic textures for indoors. The IGC carries few plastic pots. “The big-box stores sell a lot of that, so we try to not carry what they carry,” she

explains. Though blues remain top sellers, Gravert aims for as many colors as possible for indoor containers. “Most people will find something in the color they’re looking for,” she says.

In contrast, plastics are big at ECGC. “I think there’s more of a demand and a need for interior lightweight, plastic houseplant containers,” Short says, adding she’d like to see more vendors in that category. “That is a trend that vendors

need to get on and start working on and making it price competitive, for consumers and for our cost,” she says.

Creative consolidation, display and sales

Container and pottery storage is challenging when free space is at a premium — as it is for most IGCs in spring. When your pots for the previous year didn’t come until season’s end, storage hurdles multiply fast.

During a “normal” year at ECGC, pottery is displayed in one area, with some items featured on store endcaps and inside the greenhouse. But, of course, 2023 isn’t normal. “This year, we had to build benches out where our annual greenhouses are — we call it Potteryland — so this is another Potteryland,” Short says.

East Coast Garden Center created ‘Potteryland’ and held a big sale to move pottery out and make room for plants this spring.



Katie Short, general manager at East Coast Garden Center, says customers can’t get enough pottery.





Top: Inside Hoerr Nursery, indoor decor is mixed with complimentary containers.

Middle: Hoerr's displays show unique outdoor and indoor living options mixed with pottery.

Bottom: Smaller novelty containers are grouped together at Hoerr for easy browsing.

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— KIM GRAVERT, HOERR NURSERY

When *Garden Center* spoke with Short, she was days away from a massive pottery sale. "Our facility was already tight on space," she says. To make room for plants and hard goods hitting the store for spring, ECGC is kicking off the season with a "Pot(tery) of Gold" four-day, St. Patrick's Day-weekend sale. "We're trying to push some product out early and get people excited. We have trucks rolling in," Short says.

At Hoerr, Gravert gets creative with storage and displays, too. During a typical season, large pottery destined for front porches and outdoor spaces gets concentrated in one outdoor location so customers can see all the colors and options without walking the nursery grounds.

"We do have quite a few elderly customers, and they quite frankly don't want to walk that far," Gravert says. "Then we have a lot of younger people that have the mentality of 'I just want to get in there and get what I need and go,' so they don't want to walk the whole grounds."

Inside the store, Gravert creates multiple displays of indoor containers complemented by indoor décor. "That's grouped so that it's very attractive to the eye when they walk in," she says. "That's more by color so it will draw them to what they're drawn to."

Hoerr's outdoor pottery space usually converts to Christmas greens at season's end. But with 2022's pottery backlog on hand, Gravert used the pots to display greens and other holiday items in the space.

Sales, social and silver linings

As spring starts rolling, Gravert says Hoerr's pot selection is getting attention. Volcanic finishes remain strong, but novelty pots with faces are the early winner. "I'm not sure if it's because people are just now see-

ing them or what," she says with a laugh.

Gravert's staff is her best indicator of what will sell. "I can tell just by what employees pick up right away when we get them," she says. "That usually gives me a good clue to what people are going to grab and, so far, that's what they're grabbing."

To keep up with trends, Short advises, "You have to stay in the know. Read the magazines. Get connected on social media. See what consumers are talking about — new products and new vendors. We're always trying to go to the next trade show to stay on top of the trends."

Knowing your demographic is also crucial. "Pay attention to who shops your store. Drive around one day. Drive into developments and see what's on their front porch," Short adds.

Gravert follows home décor color trends to keep the hottest colors on hand in containers. This year, she's heard sage green is in, but sourcing sage green pots has been difficult. Those she found have already sold.

Gravert notes that keeping up with pots includes being ready when spring rush hits. She found a silver lining to 2022's delayed pottery shipments. Her staff usually runs ragged getting everything unpacked in spring. But with last year's shipment arriving in fall, they could take their time and think ahead.

"It actually worked great. We set it up and displayed it how we wanted it to be for spring. It saved us so much time this spring, having it already here," Gravert says. "Honestly, after doing it that way, if I can do it that way this year for next year, I will get it in in the fall again." ☘

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