

Going Green

by Amy Stewart

Integrated Pest Management

Selling a rounded approach requires a big-picture view.

CUSTOMERS BRINGING IN INSECTS to their local garden center to be identified often want to know two things: First, what is it? And second, is it a problem? Understanding this is key to promoting an organic approach to pest control. Broad-spectrum spraying can kill beneficial insects as well as pests. Tolerating pest damage may be the best way to address the problem in the long run.

Many gardeners have not heard the term “integrated pest management” or IPM, but they can grasp its principles, which include properly identifying the pest, preventing infestation, disrupting the pest’s life cycle, allowing predators to do their work and, as a last resort, using environmentally safe products.

Fortunately, says Trey Pitsenberger, Owner of The Golden Gecko Garden Center in Garden Valley, CA, his customers are ready to embrace this approach. “Because of my blog [at the-goldengecko.com], I realize what a unique situation I’m in compared to other places in the country,” he says. “People post comments and tell me about the experiences they have at their own garden center - that they can’t find organic products at all.”

Making It Work

In addition to locals and more educated and affluent shoppers from Sacramento, Pitsenberger says an increasing number of younger consumers are coming into the garden center in search of organics that support IPM

practices. “I’m seeing couples in their mid-20s, maybe with young children.”

Selling IPM-supportive products is all about offering solutions, but Pitsenberger is still figuring out the best way to merchandise the range of organic pest controls to his customers. “I always

hear that we should take a solution-based approach to organizing garden centers,” he says. “So

you’d put the aphid controls together and have three different brands.

But I’ve been trying to arrange the shop by brand.” Even though that means the aphid controls might not be right next to each other, Pitsenberger thinks customers figure it out and the section looks more approachable. “I don’t want the store to look like the back of a pharmacy,” he says.

Another way he keeps it simple is by reducing the number of products on the shelf: “The store seemed like a mishmash, so I reduced number of SKUs by one-fourth and tried to build up on the ones that were selling well. The most important thing is that we don’t carry the same stuff the chains do.”

The bottom line, he says, is to promote the fact that you’re into organics and believe in it. “Encourage people to bring insects or damaged leaves in for diagnosis,” he says. “Make yourself the information source.”

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soft-bodied pests

“For soft-bodied pests, if we’re not going to replace the plant, I walk them over to our E.B. Stone line, and we talk about the Rose-N-Flower Insect Spray,” says Trey Pitsenberger, Owner of The Golden Gecko Garden Center in Garden Valley, CA. “People look at it and say, ‘Is it dangerous?’ I say, it’s an organic spray, made out of pyrethrins, which come from a chrysanthemum flower, and it’s considered organic - but try to avoid getting it on your hands, and keep pets indoors until it’s dry.” He calls this his “it’s organic, but ...” speech. He also carries Monterey Garden Insect Spray, which contains spinosad, a naturally derived product made from bacteria. “That’s a good product for caterpillars,” Pitsenberger says. He also offers an insecticidal soap from Safer. In addition, dormant sprays are important. “We have a lot of customers who just inherited an orchard. This is one place where people really want to be organic, so we heavily promote our horticultural oils,” he says. “This definitely puts people at ease.”

pheromone traps

Pheromone traps simulate the scent of the female of a particular species. Males are lured into the traps so they can’t mate. While pheromone traps are often used in greenhouses and large orchards to monitor the insect population, they can provide thorough pest control on a small scale. Pitsenberger sells Oak Stump Farms Codling Moth Traps. “Most people don’t know about pheromones,” Pitsenberger says. “It’s a totally new concept, and it’s an easy sale.”

Tips on Succeeding with Integrated Pest Management

know your bugs

“When people have a pest problem, the first thing they do is come in and ask if they can bring us the bug,” Pitsenberger says. “So we tell them to seal it up in a plastic bag, and we’ll ID it for them.” If you’re not sure what you’re looking at, county agricultural extension agents and agricultural departments at local colleges are great resources. Because some insects can look remarkably different in their larval stage, a good insect identification guide can help.

pest-resistant alternatives

“The only roses we carry are the pest- and disease-resistant varieties. We could probably sell the others, but you know what - I personally am tired of dealing with them. I just do not want to spray every month. I don’t think my customers do, either,” Pitsenberger says. This doesn’t just apply to roses - he has made similar choices throughout the rest of the nursery, moving toward natives and tough Mediterranean plants. “I’m just trying to ease people into less-pest-prone plants,” he says.

beneficial insects

Organic gardeners know that predatory insects like ladybugs, lacewings and predatory wasps can keep pests in check. One way to encourage them is to plant flowers that attract the beneficials. Tiny clusters of blossoms are best - examples include Queen Anne's lace, yarrow, alyssum, tansy and clover. Many natives work as well - local native plant societies can be a good resource.

Pitsenberger has tried selling beneficial insects, but he hasn't seen much demand for them. "I'd rather see people planting the flowers that will attract them," he says. Lacewings and beneficial nematodes - species that target harmful nematodes - are successfully sold by some garden centers, but it just hasn't worked for him. "Unless we came up with an ongoing effort to educate the customer, I think they would just sit," he says.

deterrents for larger pests

"Moles are a huge problem here," Pitsenberger says. He sells MoleMax, a castor oil-based product that repels the gophers. "I tell people that you're not killing them, and they really appreciate that," he says. "It just drives them away." For deer and rabbits, The Golden Gecko sells Liquid Fence in the 32-ounce ready-to-use size. It contains putrescent egg solids and garlic, and although the scent dissipates quickly, it will continue to drive animals off for weeks. Pitsenberger encourages Liquid Fence for new landscapes, where even deer-resistant plants need protection for a few months while they get established. "But I really don't want people to have to come in and do this again every 30 days forever," he says.

"If they really want to have roses, they're going to need an actual fence.

Or they should consider deer-resistant plants."

Pitsenberger estimates that 75 percent of the plants in the garden center are deer-resistant. He labels these plants with a symbol - a deer with a line through it - to help customers see the wide range of plants that deer are less likely to browse.

safer options for snails

"Pets are a big concern for our customers," Pitsenberger says, "so they really want alternatives to snail bait." He's found one product that works for snails and other problems: Sluggo Plus. "People would come in with what they thought was snail damage - the leaves looked like Swiss cheese, but there were no slime trails. I told them they probably have earwigs." Sluggo Plus contains pet-safe iron phosphate for slugs and snails and spinosad for earwigs and cutworms. The Golden Gecko sells it for \$24.99 in the 2.5-pound size. "I've never had any price resistance," he says. "If they are into organics, the price is less important."