

The Who, What and How of Generation Y

This young generation may surprise you with its expectations for retail.

by Ellen C. Wells
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Born roughly between 1980 and 1995, Generation Y is about 60 million strong and represents the largest consumer group in the history of the United States. But compared to the previous generations covered in this Gardening Through the Ages series, we should really be asking “generation who?” instead of how many.

A majority of Gen Y has yet to break the threshold of 18 into technical adulthood, and it's the young adults 18-25 who are the focus of Gen Y garden center marketing. (Mid-teens and their younger siblings will be considered in the final GTTA installment.)



For such a young demographic, Gen Y's spending power is \$172 billion as an entire group, with about \$61 billion spent by young adults. But who exactly are these newcomers to the shopping scene? And what are they doing with their – and their parents' – money?

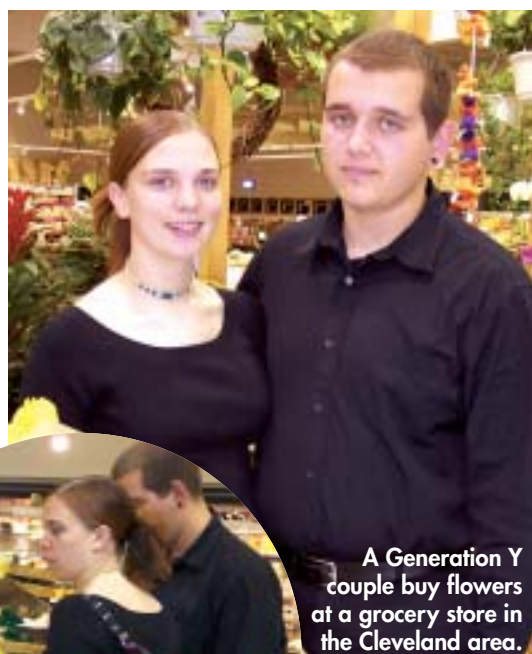
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Gen Y is the largest demographic to come along since the post-World War II Baby Boomer generation, mainly due to the fact that the majority of them are the children of Baby Boomers and Generation Jonesers. With 60 million among their ranks, they are much larger than the Xers who came before them (40-45 million). A true view of Gen Y and how they are bound to affect the economy, politics and

culture in the future is – to a degree – obscured by their parents. Unlike Gen Xers, who distanced themselves from their parents' ways, Gen Y is heavily influenced by their parents. Absent of their parents' influence, the collective tendencies of this group, once they are on their own, are difficult to determine.

Demographically, Generation Y is unlike any generation before them. The group is racially diverse, with one-third of Gen Y considering themselves non-Caucasian. This diversity speaks to their tolerance and acceptance of multiculturalism and willingness to experience the non-familiar. Gen Y individuals are accustomed to single-parent households, with 25 percent living with just one parent in the home. And 75 percent of Gen Y has been raised with a mother working outside the home.

They are the first generation to be fully immersed in the Internet and technology age, never really knowing a time when information – and pretty much anything else they wanted – wasn't readily accessible. Cell phones, instant messaging and wireless capabilities make them not only comfortable adapting to new technologies, but also make them accustomed to being a hub to which information is driven.



A Generation Y couple buy flowers at a grocery store in the Cleveland area.



Another characteristic of Y is an ability to work in teams. A recent *Boston Globe* article points out that a shift in education during the 1980s emphasized collaboration, team work and communication to boost children's self-esteem. This created a generation comfortable with being part of a group – as leaders and followers – and finds success in cooperation.

The future of Gen Y is up in the air. Demographers have proposed this generation will fill the gap left by their grandparents – the “hero” generation that dominated the era between the World Wars. That influence, combined with a tendency toward multiculturalism, service and teamwork, may lead to a generation with great civic contributions ahead.

Y They Buy

What does this say about Generation Y and gardening? The foremost influence on their shopping habits and overall behavior is technology. If garden centers can implement technology, Gen Yers will use it. Technology that brings information to the shopper, makes the topic understandable and streamlines purchasing is the only process this generation knows.

Informative and current Web sites, informational kiosks, easy-to-understand instructions, pre-ordering and on-demand pick-up – all of these technologies are available and must become mainstream in order to capture the Gen Y market. Crossover technologies could be a boost to garden center retail, too, and jumping on those trends now will grab Gen Y as they gain disposable income.

But first, Gen Yers have to be interested in gardening or home decoration. Gen Yer Charlie Cole of Cole's Gateway Gardens in Concord, N.H., sees the generation as lacking garden awareness. "They are not familiar with plant material, plant names or how and where to plant," says Cole. "This may be because they haven't been as active in the garden with their parents."

Kelly Staats, sales support/customer service for Eason Horticultural Resources in Ft. Wright, Ky., has an interesting viewpoint because she is on the cusp of the Gen X/Gen Y demographic.

"I can see that our lives may turn out to be too busy to get involved with gardening as a hobby," Staats says. "My hope is in the popularity of television remodeling and home shows – these shows can do a lot to motivate my generation to be interested in their landscapes, patios and gardens."

Staats also has a keen insight into another gardening motivation: neighbor activity. "We would be motivated to purchase flowers later in the spring after we see our neighbors' plantings," Staats says. "Gen Y will probably want the material later than the time our industry traditionally promotes it."

A Multicultural View

Let's take the multicultural aspect of Generation Y. Zen- and Japanese-style gardens hit the mainstream years ago. Italianate gardens have had some reach in the United States, but other cultural influences have yet to be explored or maximized in the garden, and not just in plant design but in stonework, pottery, archi-

tectural elements, fabrics and furniture. Think Moorish tiles, Mexican pottery and African statuary coming together in one design to complete a multicultural, multi-colored outdoor room.

The 18- to 25-year-olds of Gen Y may not be in the market for imported Spanish tiles quite yet, although they may be headed in that direction in the coming years. For now, as Scott McCabe of McCabe's Greenhouse & Floral in Lawrenceburg, Ind., reminds us, Gen Yers are decorating their apartments.

"When they shop for themselves, they are usually looking for something in a container or hanging basket, something easy that can add a little decoration to their home," says McCabe, a Gen Yer himself.

Catching Y's Eye

Staats suspects Gen Yers, like Xers, don't have time to make special trips to garden centers. "I suspect Gen Y's horticultural purchases are impulse items that they see on trips to grocery or hardware stores while purchasing other items," she says. "Eye-catching, seasonal items by the register are an easy retail trick. And fancy displays always catch my eye while shopping."

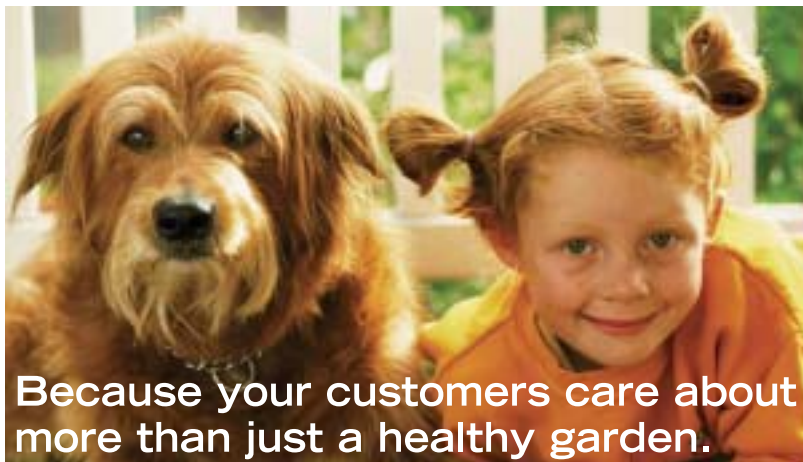
Cole also believes in the power of good merchandising. He puts himself in the scene when working on a display. "When I am looking at a new product, I want everything for it in one spot," he says. "I don't want to look around the whole store for accessories that I don't even know exist. At our garden center, we keep trying new things and changing displays in order to continually look fresh."

Cole credits Target stores for knowing how to attract younger generations with bright colors and fun products.

McCabe says to keep the Gen Y man in mind in garden center retail. "What interests me are sports and electronics. If a couple is shopping, there has to be something for the male to do, not just shopping for flowers," he says.

Without something else to do, men may very well get antsy and head for the door. Football scores may not belong with the trickling water displays, but for guys, the roar of the crowd has the same calming effect. TGC

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