

## Know Your Native Plant Buyer: What Drives Purchase Decisions and How Much Customers Spend



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Native plants make up just 10% of ornamental plant sales in the United States. That number has stayed stubbornly low despite growing consumer interest in sustainable landscaping, pollinator habitat, and lower-maintenance yards. So what is keeping the other 90% of plant buyers from choosing natives, and what can growers and retailers do about it?

A nationwide study of 1,824 US homeowners set out to answer exactly that. The research, led by the authors examined not just who buys native plants, but what separates a one-time buyer from someone who spends heavily on them. The findings offer a practical roadmap for green industry professionals who want to grow this market.



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### Two Decisions, Not One

One of the study's most useful contributions is its framing of native plant purchasing as a two-step process. The first decision is whether to buy at all. The second is how much to spend. These two decisions are driven by different factors, which means that the marketing strategy that gets a new customer through the door is not the same one that increases basket size among established buyers.

For growers and retailers, this distinction matters. It points to the need for two distinct messages aimed at two distinct audiences: potential adopters who have never purchased a native plant, and committed buyers who are already in the category and can be encouraged to spend more.

## Who Is Your Most Likely Buyer?

The study found a clear demographic profile for native plant adopters: younger, college-educated homeowners living in metropolitan or suburban areas. Younger homeowners were more likely to buy native plants and spent more on them than older buyers. Metropolitan homeowners were more likely to be adopters, which aligns with their potential need for plants suited to challenging urban growing conditions.

Higher education was linked to adoption, likely because college-educated consumers are more familiar with the environmental arguments for native plants. Higher household income correlated weakly with adoption but did not significantly predict how much was spent, suggesting that the native plant buyer is motivated by something other than disposable income.

For retailers, this profile has direct implications. Native plant signage, in-store programming, and digital marketing will find their best audience among urban and suburban millennial and Gen X homeowners. Garden center events, social media content, and partnerships with neighborhood beautification programs can all be targeted to this segment.

### The Single Biggest Factor: Having Natives Already

Among all the variables tested, already having native plants in the landscape was the strongest predictor of both purchasing natives and spending more on them. Homeowners who had native plants were dramatically more likely to buy again and to spend significantly more per year.

This finding has a clear implication: the first native plant sale is the most important one. Getting a customer to take home even a single native plant dramatically increases the probability that they return for more. Retailers should think carefully about entry-level strategies (approachable price points, easy-care species, or native plant starter bundles) that lower the barrier to a first purchase and set the stage for repeat business.

Believing that incorporating native plants into gardens is important was the second-strongest predictor of both purchase and spending. Consumers who already hold this value are primed to buy. Those who are neutral or unaware represent the conversion opportunity that education and marketing can address.

*Adopters spent 80% more on all plants compared to non-adopters, making them high-value customers across the entire plant category, not just for natives.*



Photo Source: Stock Images Microsoft.

### Availability Is Not Just a Supply Problem — It Is a Marketing Problem

The study found that believing native plants are readily available in the area increased both the probability of purchase and the amount spent. This finding might seem straightforward, of course availability matters, but the implication runs deeper than stocking shelves.

*Consumers who knew where to shop for native plants were dramatically more likely to be buyers. Awareness of availability, not just availability itself, drove purchasing behavior.*



Photo Source: Stock Images Microsoft.

Many consumers are unsure whether their local garden center carries native plants, and many who do carry them fail to merchandise them in a way that makes them easy to find. A dedicated native plant section, clear signage, and active communication through social media or email about what is in stock can all shift a consumer's perception that natives are available, even before they walk through the door.

For producers, this finding argues for investing in retailer relationships and point-of-sale support. Getting product on shelves is necessary but not sufficient.

### **What Aesthetics Actually Matter**

Aesthetic perceptions played an important and nuanced role in the study. Among the attributes tested — including variable vs. uniform growth, compact vs. leggy habit, colorful vs. dull, showy vs. plain, and aesthetic alignment with preferences, the factor with the strongest effect on spending was whether the plants aligned with the buyer's personal preferences.

Consumers who felt native plants matched what they were looking for in a landscape spent significantly more. Those who rated natives as too dull or too showy spent less. The takeaway: the native plant shopper is not asking for a conventional-looking landscape, but they do want plants that fit their vision. The goal is not to make natives look like introduced ornamentals, but to help consumers find the natives that speak to their specific aesthetic.

This points to the value of diverse product assortments that span different aesthetic profiles, from showy prairie species to understated groundcovers, and to merchandising that helps consumers picture the plants in their own yard. Display gardens at retail locations, before-and-after landscape photos, and curated plant combinations can all help bridge the gap between what a customer imagines and what they see on the bench.

Notably, perceiving native plants as aesthetically unpleasing overall did not significantly reduce purchasing in the statistical model. Many consumers who buy natives acknowledge they look different, and buy them anyway, motivated by environmental values and function. The aesthetic barrier is real, but it is not the dominant force this industry sometimes assumes.

### **Price Sensitivity Among Committed Buyers**

Native plants are typically more expensive to grow than introduced ornamentals, and this cost passes through to the consumer. The study found that among adopters, people who had already decided to buy, perceiving native plants as expensive reduced the amount they spent. In other words, price sensitivity did not prevent the purchase, but it did constrain the basket.

This finding suggests that retailers can capture more revenue from existing native plant buyers by creating value narratives around price. Highlighting the long-term savings from reduced irrigation, fertilization, and pest management can reframe the conversation from upfront cost to total cost of ownership. Bundled pricing, loyalty programs, and clearly communicated longevity and low-maintenance benefits can all help committed buyers feel comfortable spending more.

Importantly, price was not the primary barrier to first-time purchase. Getting new consumers into the category does not require discounting. It requires education about environmental benefits, better in-store availability signaling, and accessible entry points.

### **Marketing Messages That Work**

Marketing for native plants should lead with environmental benefits, site adaptability, and low-input advantages, not just aesthetics. Consumers who are already in the category respond to these messages. Consumers being recruited into the category respond even more.

Sample marketing messages tied to specific environmentally friendly attributes that emerged: position native plants as heroes for pollinators, as quick-establishing and low-maintenance options, and as plants that thrive where others struggle. These messages connect native plant benefits to the practical realities of gardening (less time, less water, less money spent on inputs) while reinforcing the environmental values that matter to this buyer segment.

For social media, native plants lend themselves well to wildlife-focused content: bees visiting flowers, birds using seed heads, butterflies on prairie species. This type of content resonates strongly with the urban and suburban younger buyers who are most likely to adopt. It is aspirational in a way that connects daily plant care to a larger sense of environmental contribution.

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