



GARDEN CENTERS
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
RESEARCH RESULTS

2018



Garden Centers Customer Satisfaction Research Project Results 2018



Brought to you by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Minnesota Grown Program. Funding for the Garden Centers Customer Satisfaction Research Project Results 2018 was made possible by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service through a Specialty Crop Block Grant (SCBG). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the USDA.

Project Background

This research project was conducted by the Minnesota Grown Program at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture in early 2018. Customers were surveyed about their experiences and opinions as customers of one of the **33 participating garden centers** across Minnesota, the equivalent of **37% of Minnesota Grown garden centers**. A total of **2,505 customers returned surveys!**

Garden centers eligible for this project were Minnesota Grown members and MNLA members in Minnesota who market directly to the end consumer and were recruited through various means including:

- Articles in Member Update, a monthly member newsletter for Minnesota Grown Program members
- Articles in the Minnesota Nursery and Landscape Association (MNLA) magazine
- Calls to garden centers to ensure awareness of the opportunity
- Conversations and presentations at association conferences and trade shows
- Emails sent directly to Minnesota Grown members
- Emails via listserves, such as SustAg, etc.
- Word of mouth

The Basics

33 participating garden centers

= 37% of Minnesota Grown garden centers

A total of 2,505 customers returned surveys.



Help us improve & enter to win a \$50 gift card!

Tell us about your experience with **[garden center name]** by taking an online survey.

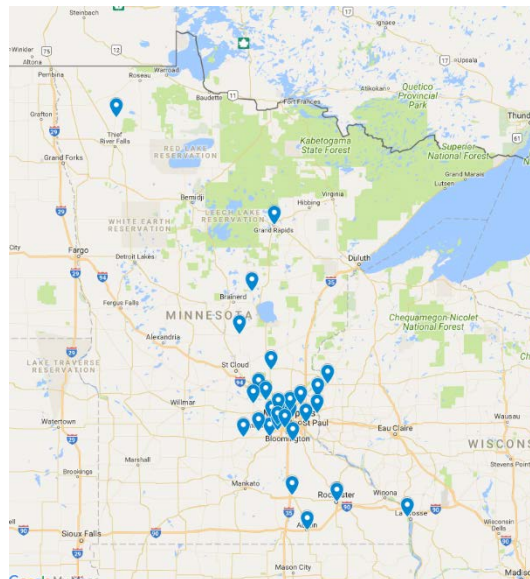
Take the survey at **[URL]** and thank you!



Customers received cards, like the one above, with their garden center purchases. Every garden center had a unique URL to direct customers to their online survey. Customers then answered a series of survey questions. The survey was voluntary and was live between April 19 to July 2 (2018). A \$50 gift card drawing incentive per garden center was offered and one winner per garden center was selected at random. This report is a summary of their feedback across all garden centers surveyed.

Garden Center Profile

The majority of the garden centers have 20+ years of experience (82%) with 18 years on average. Included in this study are Minnesota Grown and MNLA members spread throughout Minnesota.



Customer Age Comparisons ([based on past customer research](#))

This is one of eight studies making up a family of customer satisfaction projects. The projects include apple, berry, and Christmas tree growers, as well as farmers markets, CSAs, livestock producers, meat processors, and garden centers.

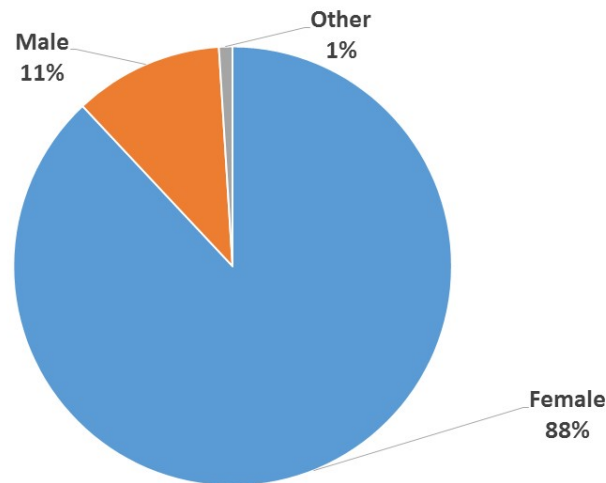
The research measures customer satisfaction to assist direct market farms, growers/producers, processors, and farmers markets statewide in better serving their customers. The information provided assists all in becoming more effective marketers, understanding customers better, and improving services and sales.

Other surveys have given us the opportunity to consider the average age of customers for various products. Garden center customers are one the oldest group of customers in comparison to other locally grown items we've studied.

- CSAs average = 47 years old
- Apples average = 47 years old
- Berries average = 49 years old
- Christmas trees average = 48 years old
- Farmers markets average = 51 years old
- Livestock average = 51 years old
- Meat processor average = 51 years old

Garden center average = 55 years old & 1st time customer average = 50 years old

Who are your customers?



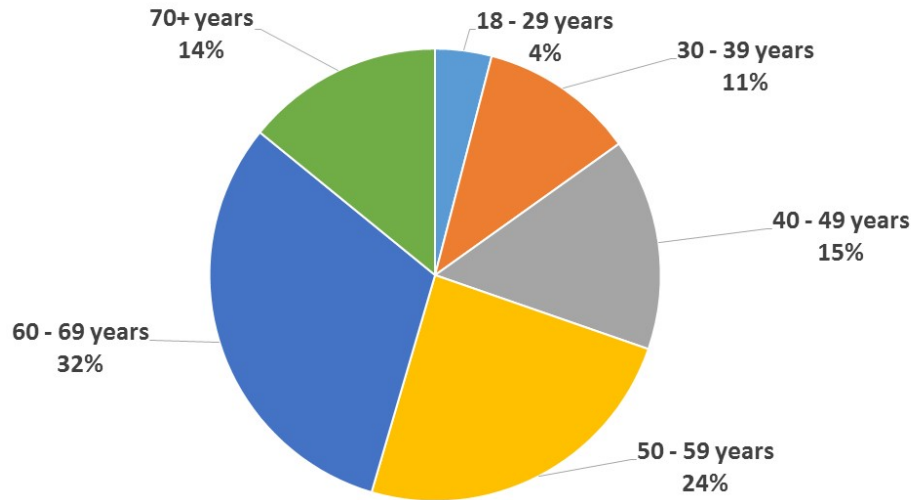
Customer Quotes from "Other"

"Thank you for your gender flexibility, my teen is transgender and it means a lot."

"Somewhere in between"

"Thanks for having this option!"

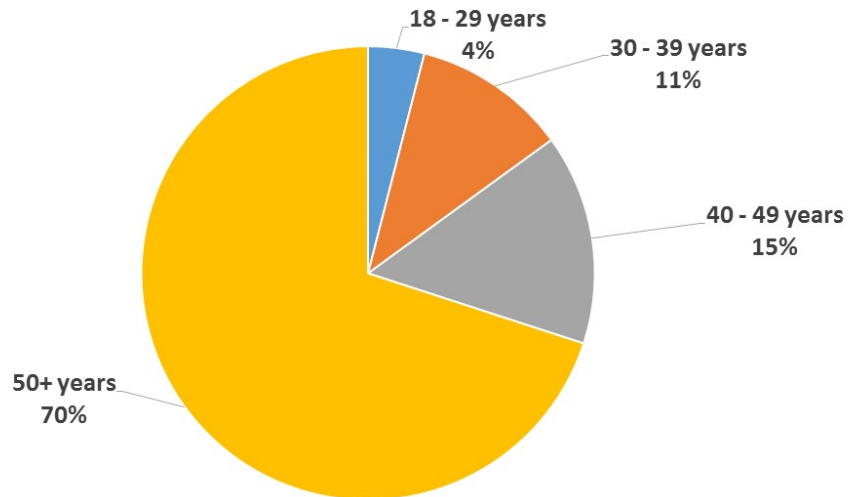
Which category describes your age?



With the average customer age of 55 years old, this is the oldest group of shoppers out of our eight research projects. Over a third of garden center customers are between 60 and 69 years old with nearly a quarter between 50 and 59 years old.

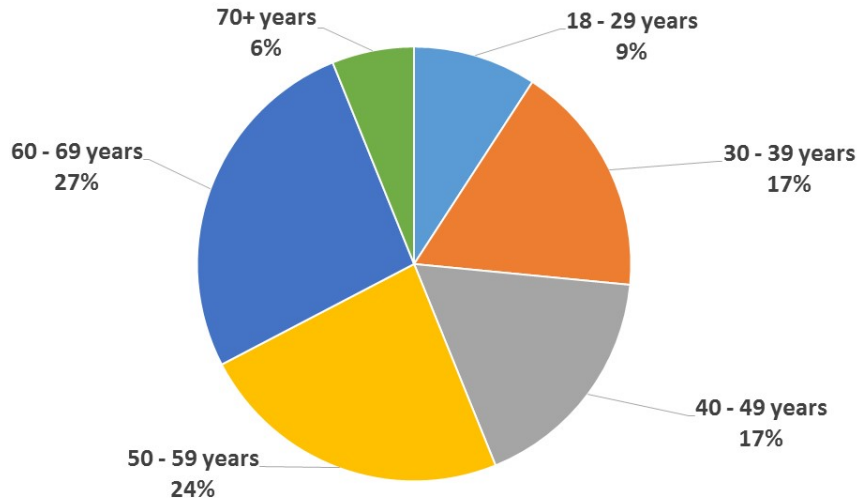
Which category describes your age?

Another way to look at the numbers



Looking more closely at the same information in another way, 70% of all garden center customers are 50 years old or older.

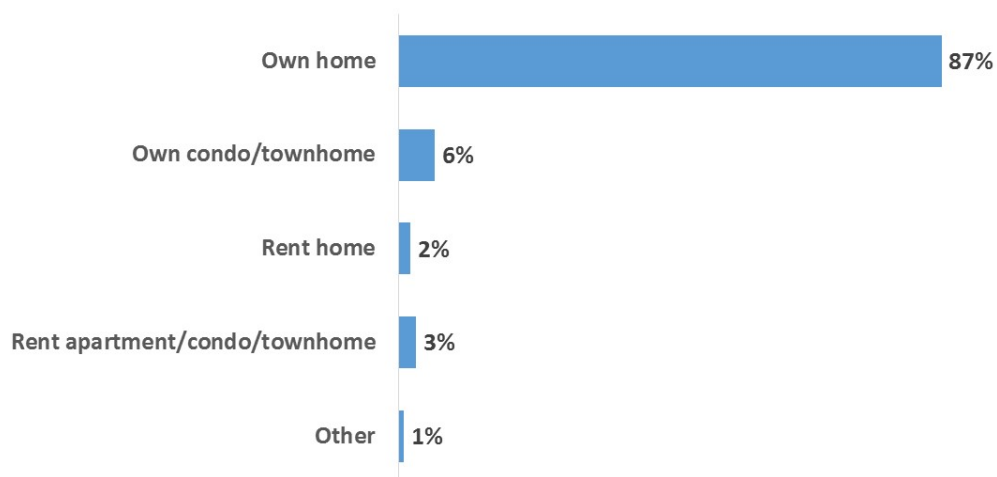
1st timers: Which category describes your age?



First time garden center customers are slightly younger at 50 years old on average. As a comparison point, first time customers for meat processors and livestock producers are 46 and 47 years old, respectively.

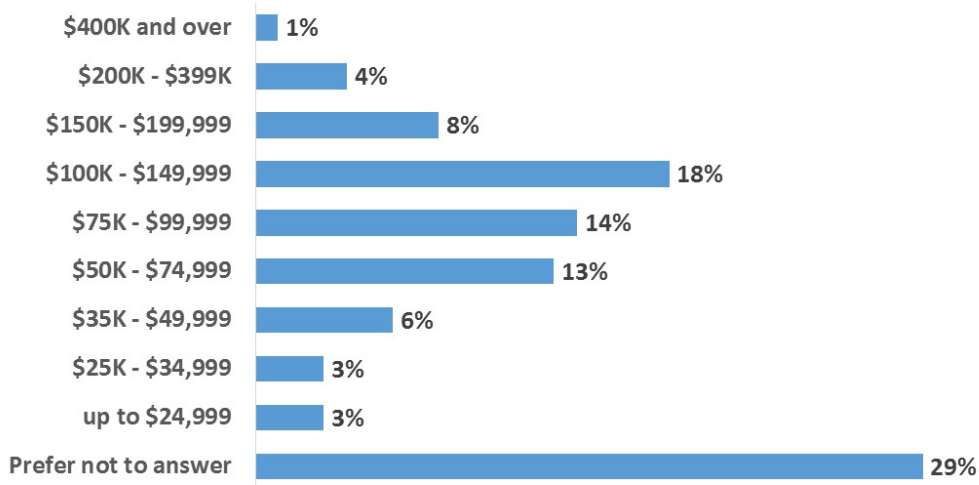
Throughout this report, we'll call out interesting facts about first time customers which can be useful in expanding your customer base. First time customers are those shopping this garden center for the first time and directly correlates with first time shopping any garden center in general.

Which of the following best describes your housing?



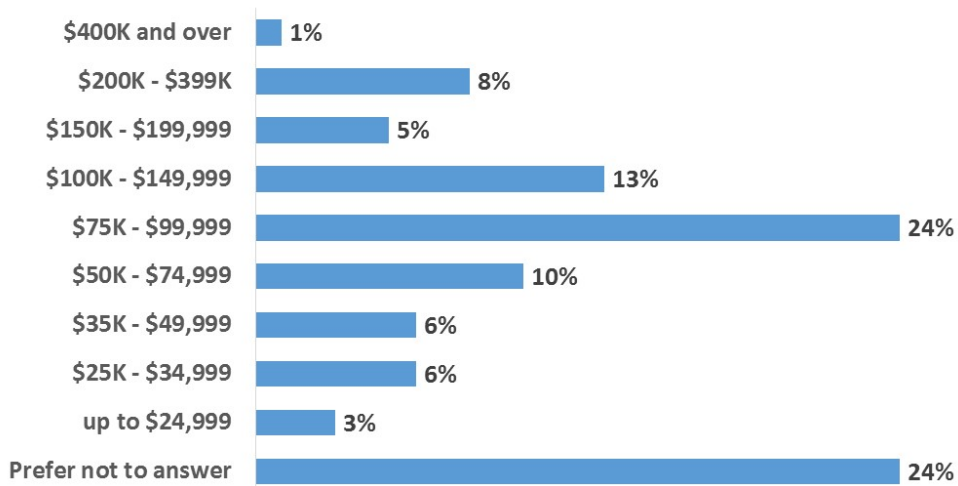
The vast majority of customers have their own homes (87%).

Which category best describes your household's annual gross income?



Nearly a third refused to answer this question. Of those who did answer this question, \$112,249.54 was the average annual gross income.

1st timers: Which category best describes your household's annual gross income?

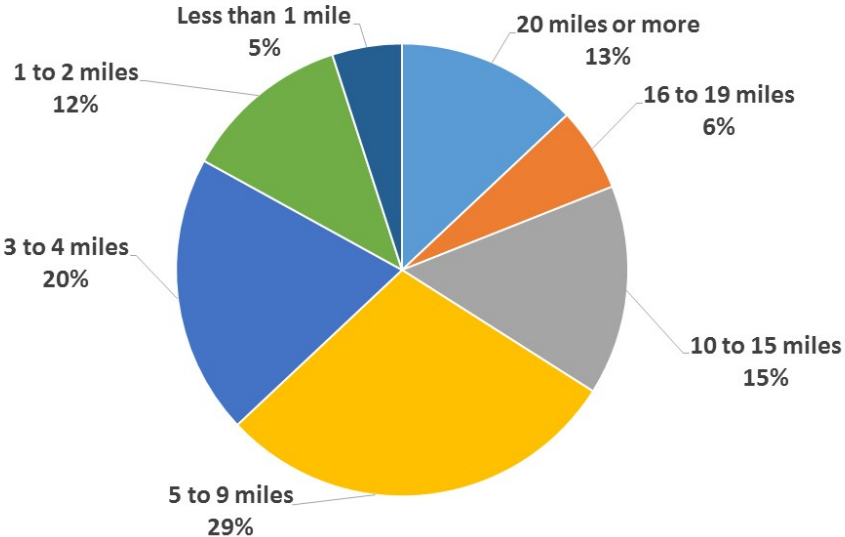


For first time garden center customers, the average was slightly higher at \$116,216.96 with a quarter refusing to answer this question.



On average, garden center customers traveled 8.5 miles.

How far is this garden center from your home?

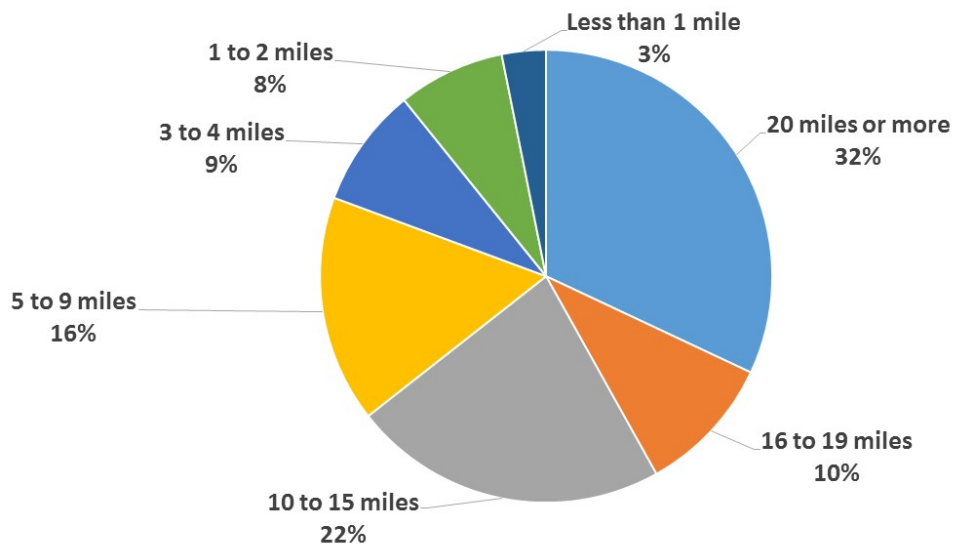


Unsurprisingly, customers liked garden centers closer to home with 81% traveling 15 miles or less to shop.



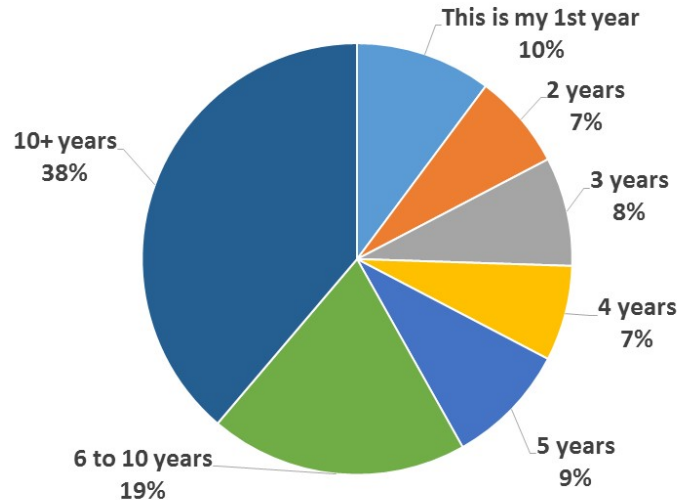
In comparison, first timer customers were willing to travel 12.5 miles on average.

1st timers: How far is this garden center from your home?



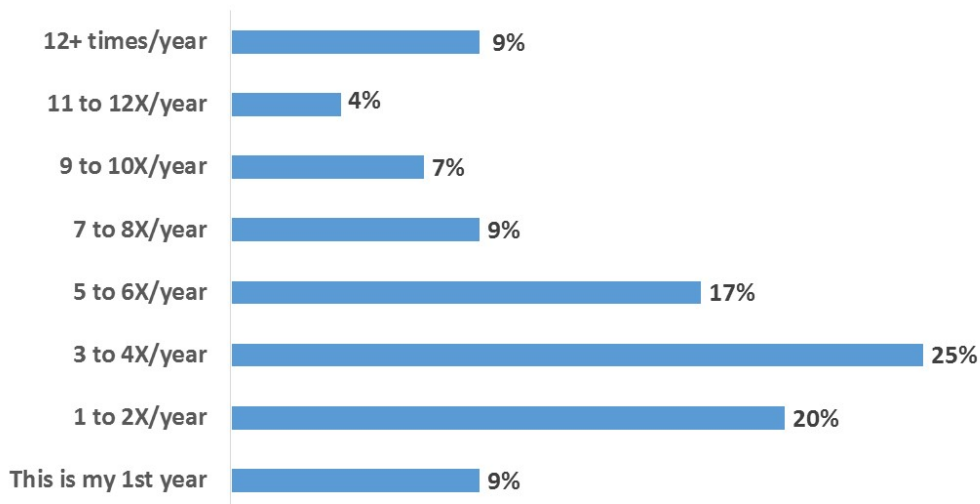
More than a third of first time customers are willing to travel 20 miles or more. Overall, the majority of first time customers traveled greater distances with 42% traveling over 15 miles.

How many years have you shopped at this garden center?



Over half of the garden center customers have shopped their garden center for 5 or more years (66%). On average, customers have shopped their garden centers for 6.7 years. For 10% this was their first year shopping their garden center.

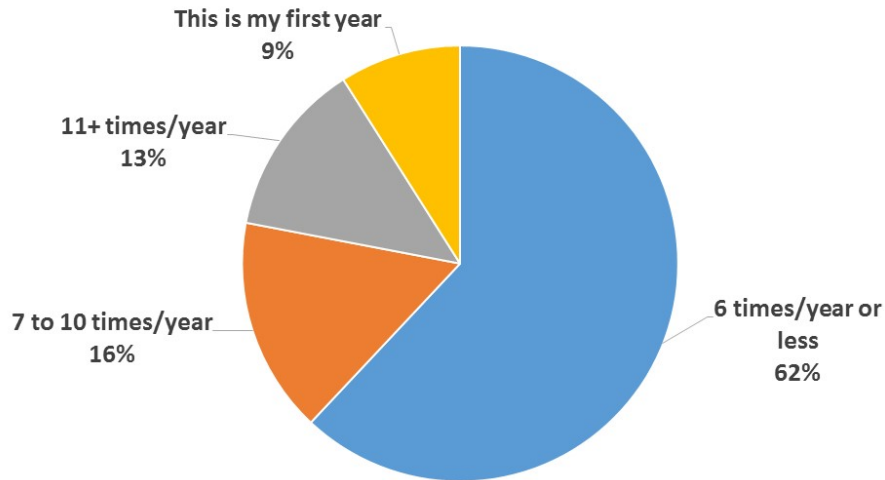
How often do you shop at this garden center?



On average, customers shop their garden center five times per year with 45% shopping one to four times per year.

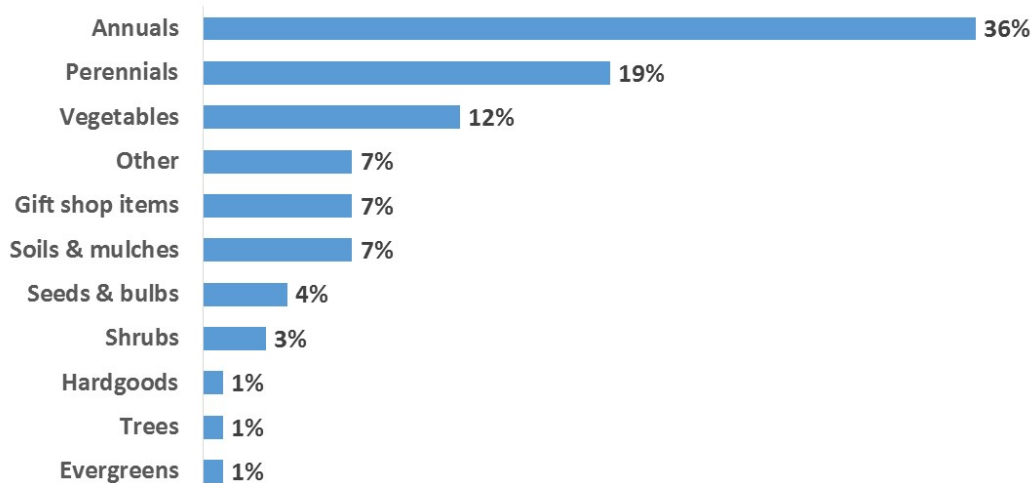
How often do you shop at this garden center?

Another way to look at the numbers



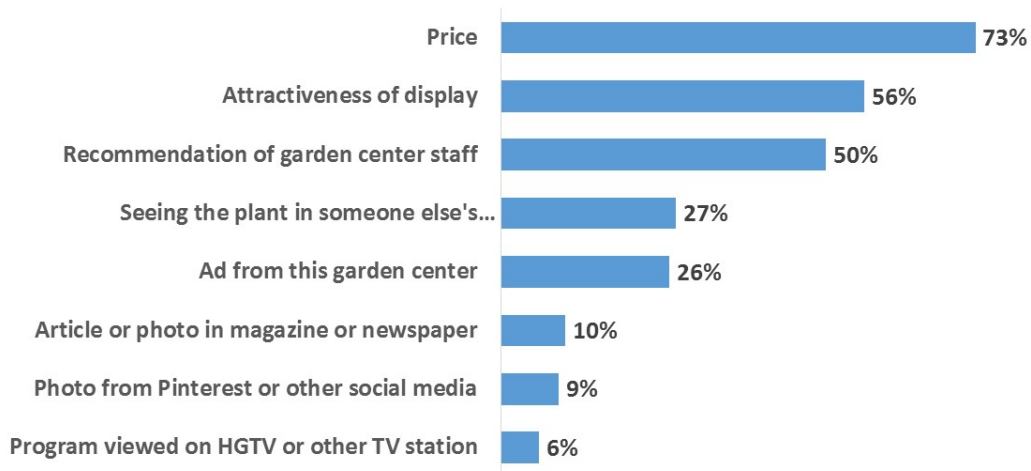
Considering the same information a different way, over 60% visit their garden center six times per year or less which means there are only a handful of opportunities to directly engage with the customers at garden centers.

In which of the following product categories did you make purchases on this visit to this garden center?



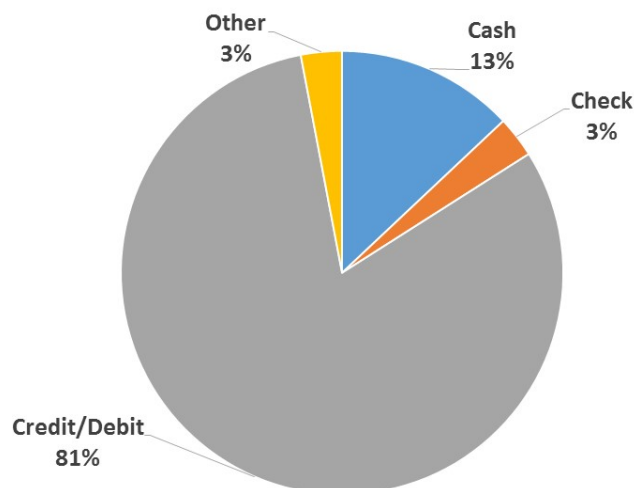
The top three product categories were Annuals (36%), Perennials (19%), and Vegetables (12%). “Other” included the most comments about gift cards, fertilizers, herbs, house/indoor plants, and succulents.

How important were the following factors in your decision to select the specific plants you purchased? (“Somewhat” / “Very”)



Customers were asked to rank each factor as “Very important”, “Somewhat important”, “Slightly important”, “Not at all important”, or “Not applicable”. Considering two out of five possible response options, garden center customers self-identified as price sensitive (73%), yet also moderately influenced by Attractiveness of display (56%) and Recommendation of garden center staff (50%). Showing, as well as explaining, the value of products could likely help customers overcome aspects of price sensitivity.

How did you pay today?

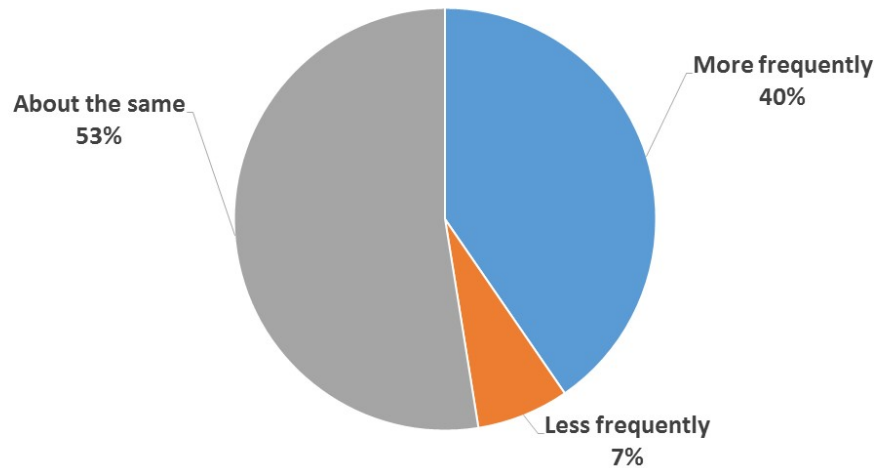


Overwhelmingly, garden center customers preferred to pay with credit/debit cards (81%), followed distantly by cash (13%). Those who selected “Other” utilized gift cards and gift certificates.



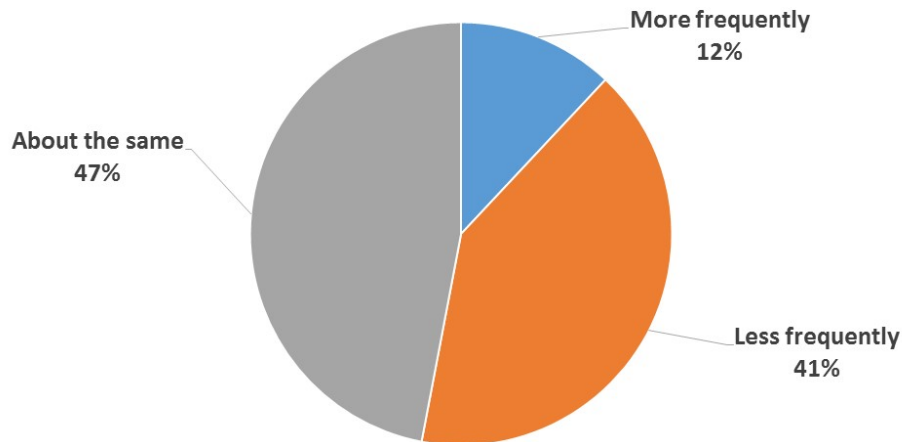
Garden center customers spent \$84.50 on average during their garden center visit.

Compared to previous years, are you shopping at this garden center more or less frequently?



93% are shopping about the same or more frequently with slightly over half of garden center customers shopping their garden center about the same. An even 40% are shopping more frequently.

Compared to previous years, are you shopping at other garden centers more or less frequently?



In comparison, 88% of customers are shopping other garden centers as frequently or less frequently. The most mentioned factors are quality, variety, service, location, and major life changes (1st homes, retirement, new babies, aging/health, and prices [too high as well as good value]).

Interestingly, daughters and daughter-in-laws were mentioned repeatedly in this section, either introducing someone to a new-to-them garden center or as someone who came along with the customer completing the survey.

Customer Quotes

"As we approach our 80s and the gardens around our home are pretty much mature (52 yrs. in the same house) our need for new plants and our energy levels are down."

"I am now retired and enjoy gardening and thus have more time to enjoy this activity."

"I am retired and prices are getting to high for me."

"I have a new baby and less leisure time for gardening at home."

"Moved to condo from single family home."

"I just bought a home last year and have been frequenting them more since."

"It's about the same from year to year. I shop depending on if I want quality or price."

"Love the manager and staff. They are so personable, helpful, knowledgeable, friendly, and it is like 'shopping with a smile.'"

"Moved to a new house and doing garden improvements."

"My daughter spoke highly about this garden center so I gave it try and am very satisfied."

"I shop less at other garden centers because it is difficult to find a quality plant at a good value."

"My garden is maturing and I have perennials, so I need to buy less. Mostly go now for colorful annuals and fertilizer needs."

"Quality of product is exceptional, excellent help, wide variety throughout the summer, location is close to home, work, and the lake, fun events that include range of interests."

"The quality I find here is so much better and I am limited with money. I know the plants I buy here are going to last."

"I stopped in twice but was never offered any help. I stopped in today to shop for mother's day because I saw all the beautiful flowers from the street. I was never offered any assistance as I did have questions but ultimately decided on a hanging basket. The flowers are beautiful but I didn't receive any help. In fact the only person that spoke to me was the cashier and she was pleasant."

"We bought a house in the last two years so we spend significantly more time shopping in garden centers than years past."

"I'm always looking for new and different plants, and garden things. You always have something new and different!!!!"

"We downsize from home with property for garden to home with tiny garden plot and deck plantings."

"Due to [your] policy permitting dogs in the store, even those that are not service dogs, and due to my allergies to dogs, I will not likely be shopping at [there] much anymore."

"I am concerned about neonicotinoids on the flowers/plants"



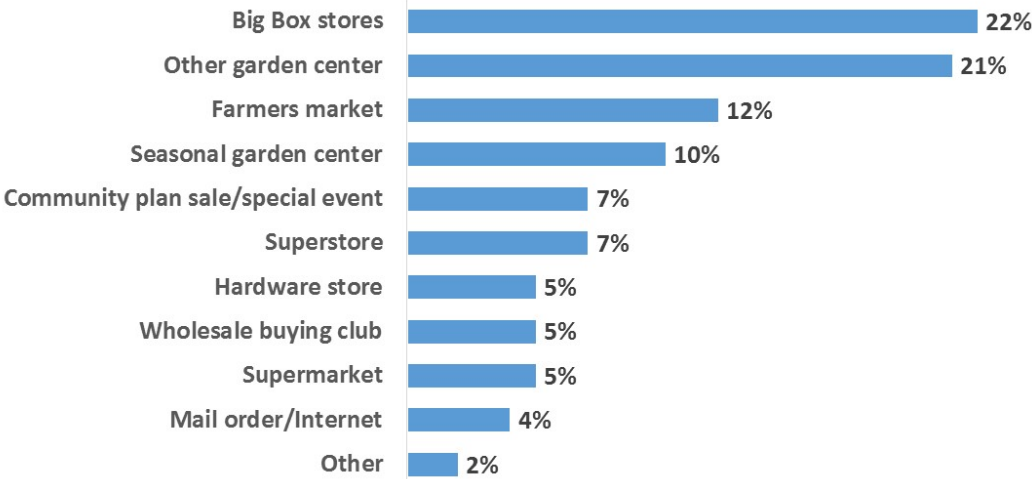
Customer spend \$376.19 annually on average on all garden and landscaping. Of that amount, customers spend \$250.59 on average at their primary garden centers.



Annually, 1st time customers spend \$274.79 on average on all garden and landscaping.

First time customers spent \$274.79 on average on all garden and landscaping.

Where else do you shop for plants and gardening or landscaping supplies?



The top three places customers shop for plants, gardening, and landscaping supplies are Big Box stores (22%), Other garden center (21), and Farmers market (12%). The most mentioned location in the comments was a variety of Amish farms and greenhouses.

When choosing between this garden center & other garden centers, how important are the following factors in your decision? (“Quite”/ “Very”)



Customers nearly universally mentioned the Quality of products as a decision-making factor (99%). The remaining top five responses were Variety of products (96%), Knowledge/Expertise of staff (92%), Courteousness/Friendliness of staff (91%), and Price of products (82%).

Overwhelmingly mentioned in the comments were staff (often identified by name) who were helpful or had specialized expertise. Also frequently mentioned were quality, price, variety, trust, and not using neonicotinoids.

The relative importance of price when choosing garden centers is greater (82%) than when customers are selecting particular plants which is 72% (see page 12). Price (real or perceived) is not as important when choosing a garden center as when choosing between plants at a given garden center.

Customer Quotes

"A lot of times I kind of know what I'm looking for in shape and color but not exactly. It helps to have staff with expertise enough to tell me what will work where and knowledge of their stock to show me where things are that would work for my situation."

"I enjoy the knowledge of the staff. They have helped me to find the right plantings for the space in which they will be planted. This is important to me and draws me back to shop."

"[Staff person] helped us on this visit, she was excellent, knew her products and was able to answer all questions."

"I like [this garden center] because I know that the plants grown are pollinator friendly and not sprayed with damaging chemicals."

"[This garden center] always provides the customer many options of product, service, and knowledge on gardening."

"Compared to other garden centers I was very happy to be helped right away and checked on multiple times to make sure I was finding what I needed. The selection was great considering how late I was to get my plants this season and they were in excellent health."

"Every one of the staff was friendly and courteous! They tried to be so helpful without overly doing it! It is such a charming store and it makes you want to come back!"

"Helpfulness and knowledge is very important. Pricing would be the next important thing along with quality of product."

"I choose this garden more often than others now because of the larger selection and, even more importantly, the healthy quality of the plants."

"Sometimes I don't mind paying a little extra for good quality and good return policy on perennials."

"I knew that I could trust [this garden center] to have locally sourced seed for native plants that did not have neonicotinoids."

"Love the no neonic policy and native plant selections."

"I will drive farther to get to a garden center that has good quality stock, variety and a pleasant atmosphere. If I have to drive a ways to get there, I want to feel like I have had a nice experience and not just a trip to buy some plants."

"Love the friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable staff. I live above 45 miles, and it is so worth the drive!!"

"Price is one of the few reasons I shop elsewhere sometimes. The product is good, but the plants can be very expensive compared to other stores."

"Staff are always knowledgeable or know who is. Extremely helpful and happy staff."

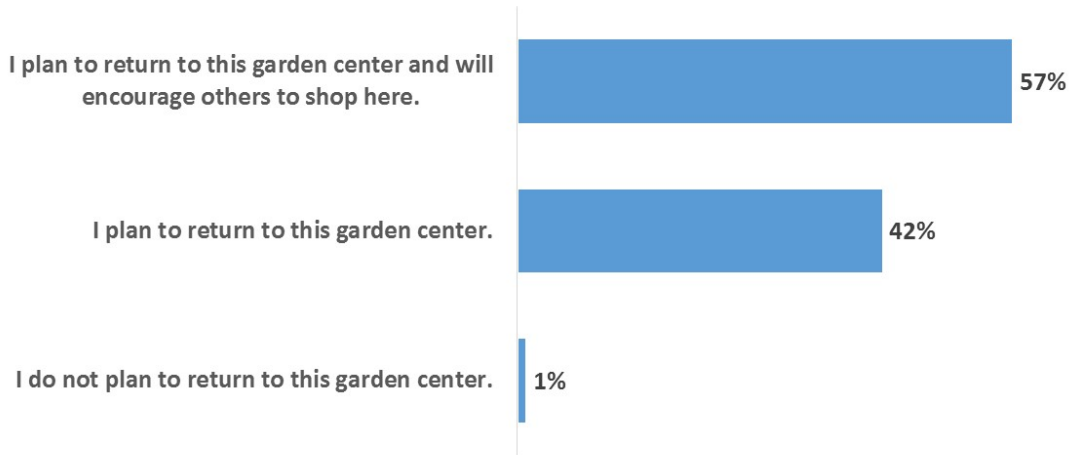
"The friendliness at [this garden center] is lacking. The environment is welcoming, but some employees are not."

"The staff is very knowledgeable and nice. My only criticism would be that the decor items price tags are turned so you can't always see them. Many stores do this same thing and I understand the strategy, but being handicapped, it's very difficult to reach for things to see a price. Handicap people have money to spend like everyone else."

"[This garden center] is a local home town business, love to patronize businesses in our hometown."

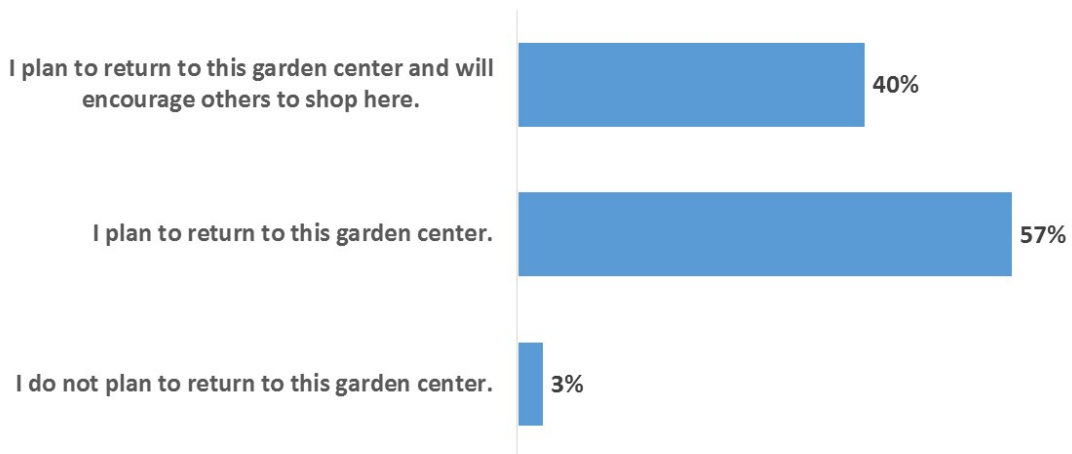
"I'm retiring this year so location, quality and price is important to me."

Which of the following statements is most accurate and why?



Nearly all customers intend to return to their garden centers (99%) with over half (57%) planning to encourage others to shop there as well.

1st timers: Which of the following statements is most accurate and why?



More than half of first time garden center customers intend to return to their garden centers (57%), with a smaller number also actively encouraging others to shop there (40%).

Customer Quotes

"I bring friends here to plant shop and help them select plants. I know their yards and they know my yard and my knowledge of plants."

"After a long spring it was a pleasure to see blue skies and sunshine. Also check out all the available flowers/shrubs/garden and planting pots. Thanks also for the treats. I will be back when we have extended warm days to shop for the remainder of my potted plants and garden tomatoes."

"Already passing the word about your customer service and landscape design and help."

"I always share what I have found - variety, colors, availability."

"I always tell people about it when they comment on my flowers."

"Store recorded message says it opens at 8am Sunday. Wrong. Disappointing."

"I always tell people I prefer it because of the variety and health of the flowers. I believe they stay vibrant/healthier than at other places. I also believe the container of plant fertilizer helps the plants thrive better all summer long."

"I have already told and shown my neighbor ladies my plants and they also went to buy their plants there about 15 minutes after they saw mine."

"Very accessible for handicapped people. The employees were so friendly and overly helpful. The drive was well worth it and we will be back!"

"I have always had great service and I tell all my friends if they are willing to pay a little more money for their plants – they will get the service that other stores do not provide."

"I have been in your store several times when the manager got into a "pissing contest" with another male employee (he was trying to show that he knew more than the employee). That's a BIG turnoff. It makes me not want to return to the store."

"I like to patronize locally owned businesses, the employees were friendly and knowledgeable, they have a good selection, and the prices were not out of line."

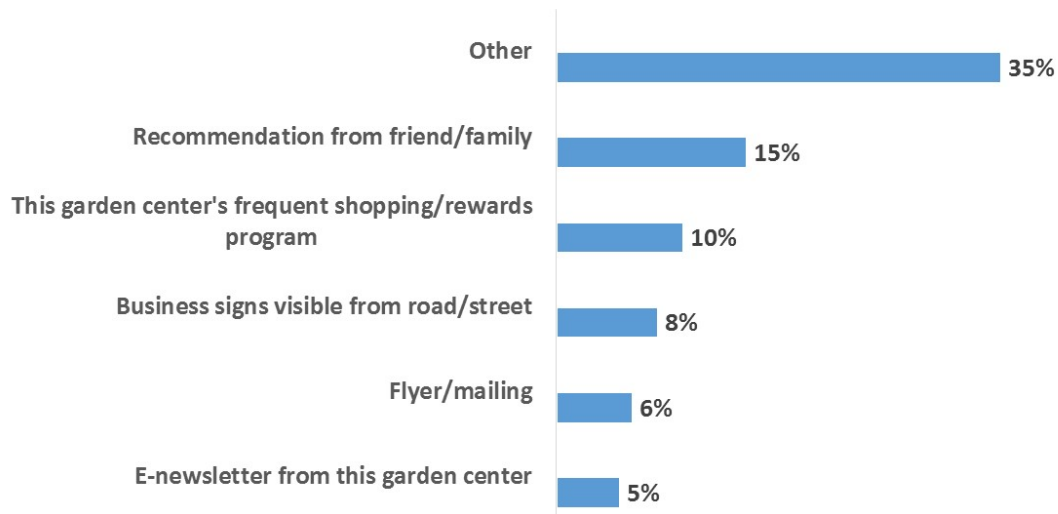
"I plan to return, but I do wish you had an incentive program, or a frequent buyer program."

"I was very disappointed that the restroom had a sign saying for employees only! Nearest public bathroom is rather far away. If the guy wouldn't have said go ahead I would have left & probably not have come back."

"I'm just done buying annuals here. The ones I bought are all already dead. Everything else I bought from [other garden center] is thriving."

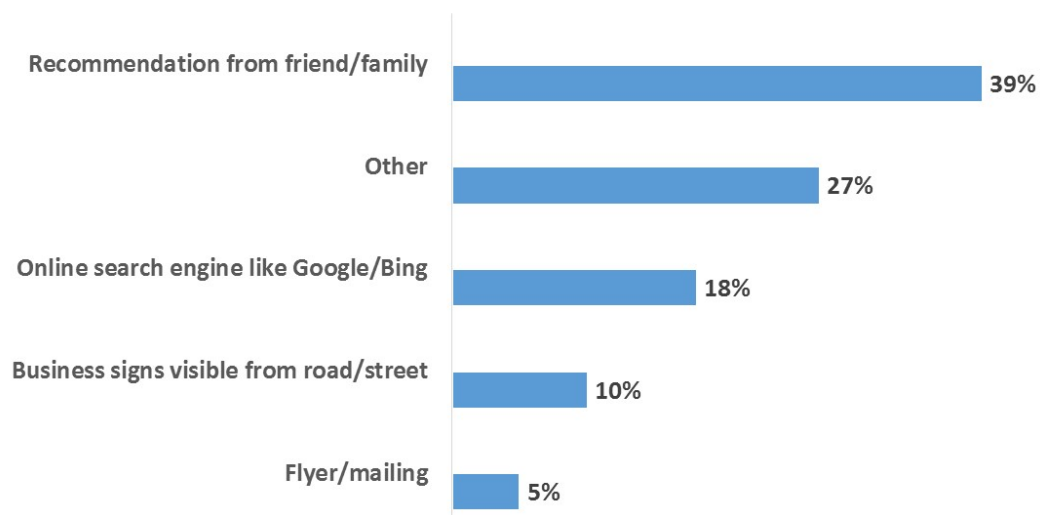
"The customer service is phenomenal & consistent. I purchased tulips & a vase about 3 weeks ago and the person at the counter asked if it was a gift and proceeded to put water & the tulips in the vase, placed it in box & wrapped it. I texted all my friends a picture of it wrapped up so pretty bragging about your service. I never expected it since I was buying them separately."

Which of the following influenced your decision to shop at this garden center?



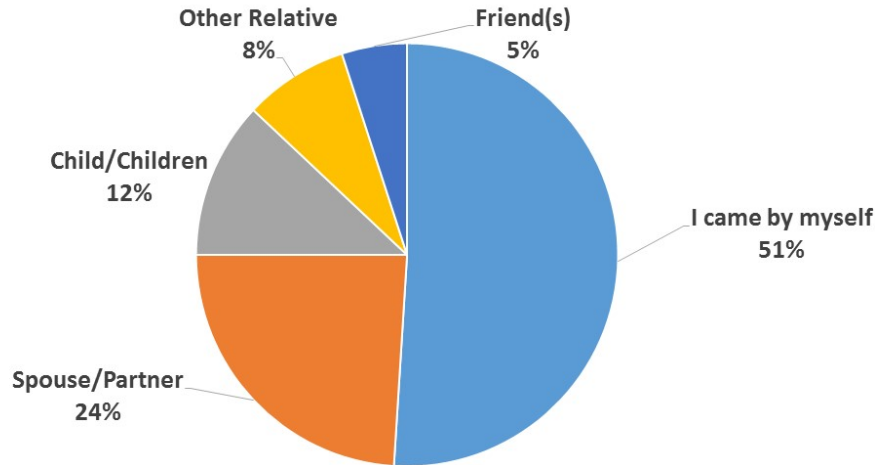
Over a third of customers selected “Other” and in the comments, location was the overwhelming factor mentioned. Additionally, some simply said familiarity (“always come here”, “been going for years, etc.”), buying local, and referrals from friends/family were also important.

1st timers: Which of the following influenced your decision to shop at this garden center?



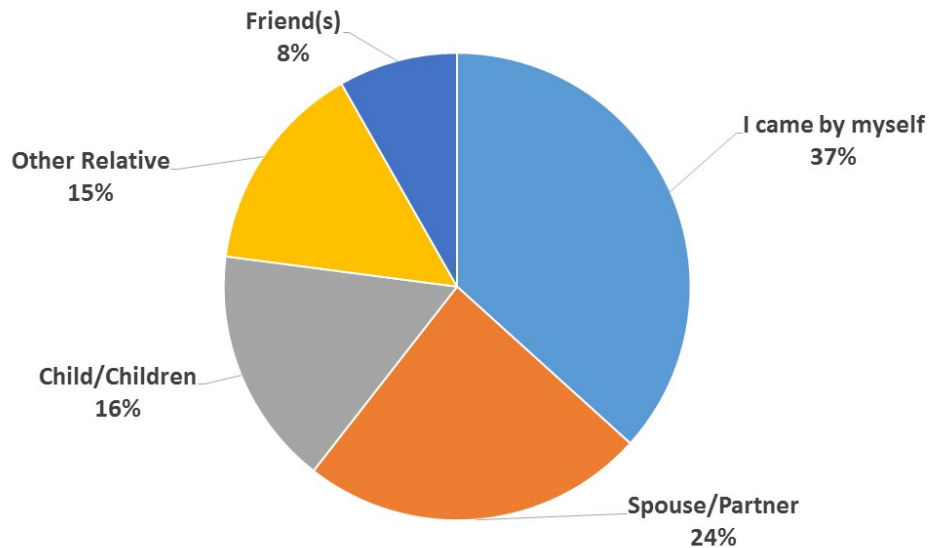
For first time customers, the recommendation of friend or family member is exceptionally important factor in their decision to shop at a garden center (39%).

Did someone come with you to shop at the garden center today?



Over half of the customers shopped by themselves (51%) and nearly a quarter shopped with their spouse/partner (24%).

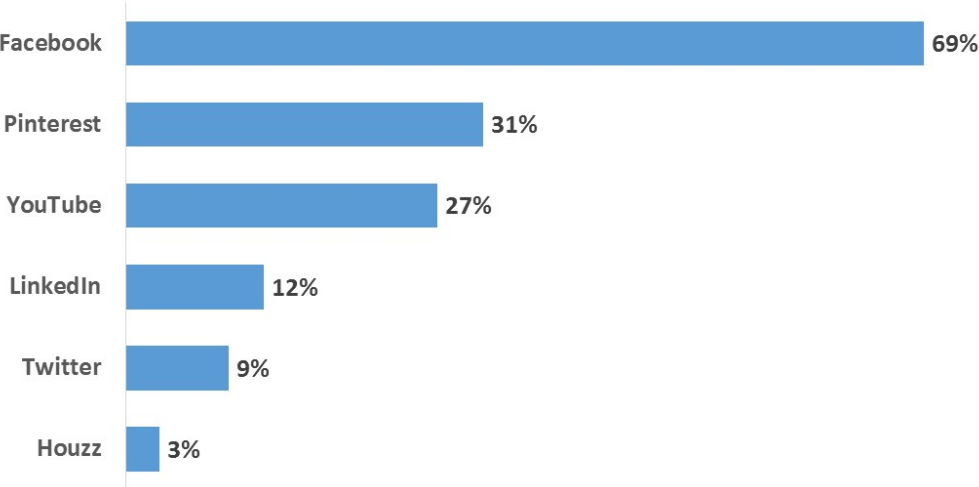
1st timers: Did someone come with you to shop at the garden center today?



Only a third of customers came by themselves (37%) and nearly a quarter came with a spouse/partner (24%). Twice as many came with a friend(s) than the overall population (8%).

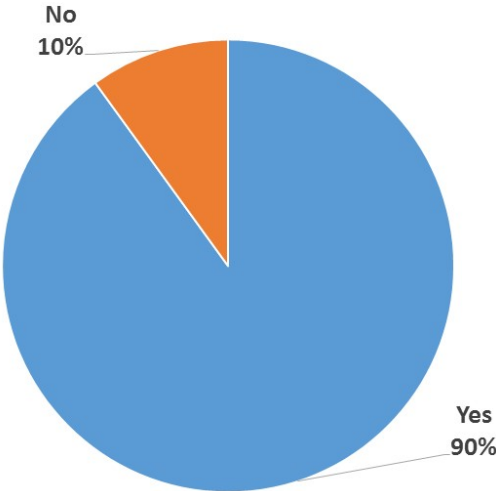
This suggests encouraging existing customers to “bring a friend along” through marketing or events could have real benefit.

How often do you use the following social media platforms (a few times per week or more)?



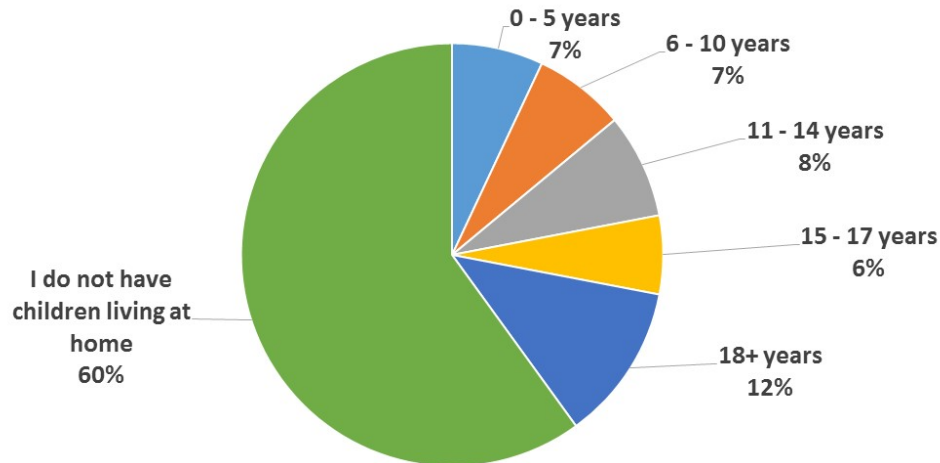
The top five social media platforms customers use are Facebook (69%), Pinterest (31%), YouTube (27%), LinkedIn (12%), and Twitter (9%).

Do you own a smart phone?



Garden center customers own smart phones at a similar rate to our other research projects (90%).

If you have children at home, which category best describes their age(s)?



Well over half of garden center customers do not have children living at home (60%).

Overall Key Findings

- Nearly all customers are happy with their garden center with nearly all planning to return (99%).
- On average, customers were 55 years old and the oldest of all of our studies. 69% of the customers were 50 years old or older.
- Encouraging existing customers to “bring a friend” would likely increase the number of first time customers based on how important recommendations from family and friends are (39%).
- On average, customers traveled 8.5 miles with first time customers traveling 12.5 miles and 42% of first time customers traveling over 15 miles.
- Over half of the customers shopped by themselves (51%) and about quarter shopped with a spouse/partner (24%). First timers were twice as likely to be shopping with a friend.
- On average, customers shop their garden centers about 5 times with 62% shopping their garden center 6 times or less each year.
- On average, customers have shopped their garden centers 6.7 years with 66% shopping their garden centers for 5 or more years. For 10% this is their first year at this garden center.
- 93% are shopping about the same or more frequently at their garden centers.
- The top 3 factors in choosing between garden centers are: Quality of products (99%), Variety of products (96%), and Knowledge/Expertise of staff (92%).
- The top 3 factors either “somewhat” or “very” important to customers’ decisions to select the specific plants they purchased are: Price (73%), Attractiveness of display (56%), and Recommendation of garden center staff (50%).

- The average sale was \$84.50 and customers spend \$376.19 at all garden centers during a typical year.
- The top 3 places customers shop for plants and gardening/landscaping supplies are: Big Box stores (22%), Other garden centers (21%), and Farmers markets (12%).
- The top 3 product categories customers purchased were: Annuals (36%), Perennials (19%), and Vegetables (12%).
- The top 3 influencers to shop at this garden center were: Other (35%), Recommendation from friend/family (15%), and This garden center's frequent shopping/rewards program (10%).
- The top 3 social media platforms customers use are: Facebook (69%), Pinterest (31%), and YouTube (27%).
- On average, customers' annual gross income was \$112,249.54, however nearly a third preferred to not answer the question (29%).

What did garden centers say about the survey process?

Feedback from the garden centers about the process was generally positive and we learned from them as well. Thank you for your feedback!

The garden centers appreciated the ease of participation in the research project and opportunity to engage with customers and Minnesota Grown.

Garden Centers' Quotes

Easy and Professional

"I think it went very smoothly."

"Loved it, I had previously set out scrap pieces of paper and a bucket to get customer feedback!"

"This route is SO professional!"

"Painless!"

Engaging and Useful

"It was a lot of fun doing the survey, we really enjoyed it and getting to chat with our guests while offering the survey. Thank you for all you do with this program!"

"I really enjoyed Tina's visit to our place of business and the resources she shared with us such as, posting events on MN grown, giving us print material and press."

"Got to interact with the customers more at the POS."

Data Collaboration and Sharing the Information

Participating garden centers also received confidential, individual market reports including their summarized, anonymous raw data and all customer comments.

The aggregate report is posted online and also announced in the Member Update newsletter.

Anonymized data sharing and collaboration with select partners is important to help increase statewide demand for local products.

We continue to listen to farmers, markets, producers, and business owners to increase the value of the results. [Contact us if you have any questions about this or other customer satisfaction research projects!](#)

