

Plant Guarantees Help Consumers Achieve Success and Buy Again

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Who likes to waste money? No one does, but that is how some consumers feel when a plant dies. Few product categories have success equated with luck as much as horticultural products. In 2007, Michigan State researchers conducted their first study on plant guarantees and showed that simply having a guarantee in place reduced the perceived level of risk in buying plants and increased the likelihood of repeat purchases. We conducted an online survey in 2016 with 500 U.S. plant purchasers and found that plant guarantees were valued more by individuals with a high level of interest in plants but a lower level of plant expertise. It wasn't that consumers returned more plants because there was a guarantee in place, but that they had *the potential* for some recourse if something went wrong.

With a \$3000 grant from the Western Michigan Growers Association, we modified the 2007 and 2015 surveys to gather more information about consumer perceptions of plant guarantees. We obtained 506 online responses by asking U.S. plant purchasers for information about the types of plants bought and amount spent, their attitudes about guarantees, perceived level of risk of buying plants, level of plant interest (also called involvement) and plant expertise, along with demographic characteristics. Data were collected from 9/15 to 9/19.

Demographic characteristics: Age ranged from 20 to 87 years old and 48% were female and 90% were Caucasian. Nearly 50% had a 2-year college degree or more education. Median household income was \$60,000 to \$79,999, and 50% of the sample lived in a suburban region. Of the total, 72% had two adults in each household and 27% did not have any children under age 18.

When asked to focus on one plant or container, the average respondent paid \$42.54 for that plant/container. One third (30%) were purchased from an independent garden center while 38.6% were purchased from a home improvement store and 14.9% from a mass-merchant. Only 26.1% knew for sure there was a plant guarantee in place (35.2% were unsure and 38.7% were sure there was no guarantee). A mere 6.5% (33 respondents) had returned the plant/container; 30% of those returning it within 3 weeks and 60% returning it within 4 weeks.

Comparing those who knew there was a plant guarantee in place with those who knew there was no plant guarantee, we found that there was a higher level of delight and a higher probability of repeat purchase among those who knew the guarantee was in place. This does not imply a cause (guarantee) and effect (greater delight, higher likelihood of purchase), but the relationship was found. The correlation between being delighted with the purchase and the likelihood of repeat purchase ($r=0.70$) was higher than the correlation between plant expertise and repeat purchase ($r=0.22$) or plant interest and repeat purchase ($r=0.40$). Delight in the plant purchase and likelihood of repeat purchase were higher in the independent garden center compared to the mass-merchant or home improvement store. We identified two consumer groups: one that was delighted and likely to buy the plant again and one that was not delighted and unlikely to buy the plant again. The delighted group scored higher on the guarantee having a positive impact on (a) the retail store at which they shopped and (b) the specific plant they bought. Thus, having a plant guarantee in place was related to a higher level of delights as well as a higher likelihood to make a subsequent purchase. The presence of plant guarantees is consistent with repeat purchase intentions, and plant guarantees should be instituted and promoted.