

Julia Hollister/For the Capital Press
Andrew Alvarado manages Sloat Garden Center in the bustling Marina District of San Francisco. His clients' gardens range in size from sweeping lawns down to window boxes.



Nursery finds niche in urban setting

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Nestled between a popular neighborhood bar and crowded restaurant is Sloat Garden Center, a plant “boutique” in San Francisco’s Marina District.

Andrew Alvarado has been manager for three years and caters to different customers’ needs.

“We’re part of the neighborhood and our plant selection reflects that,” he said. “Every customer has unique needs but the most common question has to be: ‘What do you have that’s impossible to kill?’ I try to reassure people that even the hardiest plants take a little know-how but that we’re always available for advice, knowledge and guidance.”

Sloat Gardens has three locations in San Francisco and several others in Marin County and the East Bay. Each has a different clientele. Some have customers with large expanses of lawn and gardens while the Marina location has customers with window boxes. Most of the plants are locally grown by wholesale nurseries in the Bay Area.

“We know the story behind every 2-inch succulent and 15-gallon Japanese maple that enters our doors,” he said. “All the plants are geared to San Francisco weather.”

The outside area is a dazzling array of colorful flowering plants and herbs. In addition to growing plants, Sloat’s sells high-quality garden tools, soils, planters and offers garden design and delivery. From planting and pruning to weeding, the nursery offers customers a monthly garden to-do list.

“It’s not just San Francisco weather in general but the particular and unique microclimate that is the marina,” he

said. “Most of our customers live down the street from us so we have to think of their yards when selecting our plants.”

Alvarado answers questions daily about which plants are the most popular and which are the hardest to grow.

Right now, the ficus lyrata is most popular. It’s featured in all the design and lifestyle blogs and is in high demand, he said.

“Thankfully, they’re not too difficult to take care of,” he said.

As far as the most difficult plant to grow, “in my experience, maidenhair ferns are probably the toughest,” he said. “Demanding in light, water and humidity, they don’t forgive you if it isn’t just right.”

He says many challenges face the nursery industry, but one stands out.

“In my opinion, the biggest challenge facing the California nursery industry is effectively educating the public,” he said. “We may be officially out of the drought but we still need to keep water-wise practices and drought-tolerant plants at the forefront of everyone’s minds. We have to be proactive instead of reactive; you never know when the next drought may occur.”

Alvarado said he can answer most customers’ questions, but one day he was stumped.

“One time I had a customer come in wondering why her ming aralia (a tall fern) was smelling like maple syrup,” he said. “I couldn’t figure out why initially, but we later got one in the shop and soon enough it started smelling like maple syrup, too. I figured out we had been overwatering it and when the roots rot they emit that smell.”

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