

Transcript — Episode 13: The Plants and Flowers Edition

Matt: (sniff & exhale)

Tara: Here's a little sniff of what's coming up on this episode of Inside Trader Joe's...

Maggie: That's the thing that got me with Trader Joe's honestly. If you walk in the store, I think I usually count at least one out of five grocery carts have flowers and plants in it. That's unusual for this industry.

Miggi: Mother's Day here is phenomenal just to, you know, get yourself a cup of coffee, a lawn chair and just watch people.

Maggie: The floral industry is changing so much.

Matt: How?

Maggie: Well, there is a huge impact from cannabis really.

Tara: People say, "Well, what's coming next?"

Matt: New products.

Tara: A Bloody Mary Salsa, and it doesn't have vodka in that, people, there's no vodka in the bloody Mary Salsa...

Tara: From the Trader Joe's mother ship in Monrovia, California...

Matt: Let's go Inside Trader Joe's.

[Theme music and store bells ring two times.]

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, Director of Words and Phrases and Clauses...

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the Marketing – Product guy.

Tara: This episode is the Plants and Flowers edition.

Matt: I wish this podcast were scratch n' sniff because we're talking about roses, daffodils, lilacs, orchids, basil...

Tara: But don't worry. We'll post some pictures on our website and our instagram and you can always stop by your neighborhood trader joe's to see and smell the flowers in person.

Tara: Here with us to talk about plants and flowers, we have Maggie.

Maggie: I have been in the floral industry since I was 14 years old. I actually celebrated my 14th birthday on the La flower market. My parents saw that I had a love of flowers and decided to cultivate it at a young age.

Matt: Does that mean put you to work when you were 14?

Maggie: Basically. I made my first thousand dollars when I was 11 making Christmas ornaments. Yeah, my dad would take them to work and sell them for me, and I became a floral designer. I got my first job in a flower shop when I was 15 and, uh, worked through the industry all of these years.

Tara: So how did your love of flowers bring you to Trader Joe's?

Maggie: I had actually written Trader Joe's a letter about 17 years ago, and I explained exactly why I thought they should hire me. I said, "I think you guys have an amazing customer base" because I was one of the customers. (laughs) And I never got an answer, and then an opportunity presented itself about three years ago, uh, for another grocery store chain and someone had reached out to me and asked why, why I wouldn't want to go to work for that company. And I said, "I don't want to work for a company that can't quite decide do they want to support floral as a category or not," because most retailers don't. Floral's kind of a secondary thought, and I wanted to go to work for a company that I felt was really committed to the program. And you walk in the door at Trader Joe's and you know, they're committed to floral, like no one else. So anyway, I told them "Not interested," and they said, "Well, what are you waiting for?" And I go, "I'm holding out for Trader Joe's. That same person called me back a week later and said, "You're never going to believe this, but Trader Joe's just posted a position for a category manager for floral and I..."

[Car horns, traffic going by]

Maggie: ...I pulled off the 405 freeway and started yelling, "That's my job!" (laughs) So I literally sat on the side of the freeway, applied for the job. I sent you guys a letter, "Stop looking, you found me." In my opinion, there's no industry that is more committed and harder working than the floral industry. It's not a huge profit base for most growers. They do it because they're generational. They've been doing it for so many years and they love plants and flowers. So I love the fact that we can bring that to our customers. I expect a lot of integrity from our growers and I expect them to give us what we are asking for. Freshest quality, best prices. Get it in and get it out. If something can't sell in our stores within 24 hours, it doesn't belong in our

stores, and I think that that's been the key to our success and why we have so many loyal a plant and flower customers. The floral industry is changing so much today.

Matt: How?

Maggie: Well, there is a huge impact from cannabis really. The amount of cannabis that's being grown in the United States and Canada, which Canada potted plants supply the majority of the eastern seaboard.

Matt: I just can't let "potted plants" go.

Maggie: I know.

Matt: We're talking about, we're talking about marijuana, cannabis. So is this... Why is that? I don't understand.

Maggie: Well, in order to grow cannabis, you need to grow it in a greenhouse. I mean, that's really the ideal growing grounds for cannabis is within greenhouse. What industry has greenhouses. Oh, the floral industry. Um, so the floral industry has lost a huge portion of growers in California. I mean, the landscape in the last 10 years from people that I used to be able to buy Gerber daisies from out of Carpinteria, California. There used to be, oh, five, six growers up there. They're down to two... one in Carpinteria and I believe one in San Diego are the last two in California.

Tara: So have all of those other growers...

Maggie: They've gone to cannabis.

Maggie: California produces 80 percent of the flowers that are grown in the United States. Um, we're getting to a point where those, if you don't partner and align with those growers, uh, they're not going to make it. I mean, it's a tough, tough industry. It's a tough business. Um, we try to support local growers as much as we possibly can, but the industry is definitely changing.

Matt: Whenever there's a new market opportunity, a bunch of people throng to that, rush into it.

Maggie: Absolutely.

Matt: There will be a counteraction, I assume.

Maggie: I believe so too. I do believe that everything that is old in the floral industry becomes new. If you give it time, it will come back. Baby's breath is a perfect example of that. You know, when I was a kid everyone was like, oh, baby's breath, awww... Carnations. And now some of our best performing SKUs are carnations and baby's breath. Eucalyptus is another one that has taken off. Who would have thought Eucalyptus would be one of the most popular items in our deck of, of a single varieties?

Tara: I see a lot of people online saying that they buy eucalyptus from Trader Joe's and they hang it in their shower.

Matt: Does that visual aspect of popular culture have an impact on this? I mean like if you see something like "This is hot on Pinterest or Instagram..."

Maggie: I think to a certain degree it does. We did an opportunity buy this year that was a pilea plant, which is probably one of the most Instagram plants out there. If you're a plant person, you know what pilea is. It has been referred to through history as the Chinese money plant. I didn't want to go too big because I thought that's a very nichey market. And boy, social media blew up. People were freaking out because that plant, you would buy it in a Garden Center for 20, 30, 40 dollars, and we had it for \$8.99.

Matt: So social media blew up. Did we actually sell the stuff?

Maggie: We did!

Maggie: But there's also a part of our business is to give our customers different cool things. It wasn't like this top performing item, but it got people excited. It made our customers happy.

Matt: You used a phrase that I'd like to unpack. What is an opportunity buy?

Maggie: An opportunity buy... something that we can get a great buy on. So to a certain degree we do opportunity buys when something will present itself, but a lot of it is scheduled, you know like "Hey that pilea did really well. Why don't we plan to do that again in six months?" And it gives our, our regular customers some spice. We try to keep the section as fresh as we possibly can. (Um,) I believe that most of our customers buy for home consumption, for individual consumption, which is very different. It's a much more kind of a European approach to floral.

Matt: Talk about that some more because that's interesting.

Maggie: If you go to Europe... and I was driving from Holland down into Germany, driving through residential streets and every window you drive past, there are flowers and plants in the windows. Everybody... Plants in the windows. In the United States, people kind of

question, do I want to spend the money on this for myself? That's the thing that got me with Trader Joe's honestly, and one of the things I brought up in my letter is that the customers, if you walk in the store, I think I usually count at least one out of five grocery carts have flowers and plants in it. You don't see that in any other retailer. You don't see everyone walking around the store with plants and flowers in their carts.

Matt: I'd like to see it get to like three or four out of five.

Maggie: (laughs) We're getting there. We're getting there.

Tara: Well, and I think what happens is when you walk into Trader Joe's and you see that big bunch of flowers and it's like six or seven dollars, it doesn't feel like a luxury.

Maggie: Yeah.

Tara: It feels like, "You know what, I'm worth that.

Maggie: Exactly

Tara: I can buy that for myself, and it'll make me feel good or brighten up my kitchen or it'll brighten up my office. But when something is 13, 14, \$15 at another retailer...

Maggie: Our goal is to make it when you walk by, you can't resist it because you're like, "Wow, that is an unbelievable price!" I was just at a Super Bowl dinner and my mother-in-law came up to me and said, "Hey, one of my friends was posting on Facebook that she had bought roses at Trader Joe's and that they were going on two weeks," and I said, "That makes me so happy!" That's what our whole goal is, to be able to give people that extreme value. Um, and to be able to have that lifestyle.

Matt: In Europe in particular, there seems to be a better appreciation for the... the life cycle of a plant, so people like to see it starting really small and growing up and then going through the blooming and then actually fading from bloom. Whereas here, I feel like a lot of people, it's like, "I want to see the flower now." So how do you talk with growers about that?

Maggie: It's interesting you asked that because I was just meeting with a, um, one of our, probably our biggest bulb supplier in the Midwest. There's this, this particular style of bulb plants, um, that you see in Europe where the bulbs are planted above soil, whereas in the United States, the bulbs are planted below soil, and I absolutely love the look. It looks so natural and it's just something about it that is so cool, and I'm like, "Do you guys do that?" And they said, "No because most retailers are too afraid to start the trend." A lot of a mass market companies, they're scared. They don't really understand the industry and the plant material itself. So they don't want to be the one to step out and go, "I'm going to make a commitment to do a bulb above soil that could blow up in your face and you know, have massive loss." I think

for us, we're edgy enough to lead the trend. It's interesting when you go to Europe and you talk to breeders and what they say about the US, you know, "Well we don't send that into the US. They won't spend the money or they won't appreciate it for what it is." And I'm like, "Well, you underestimate us, people. You underestimate us." And I just know from the growers that I deal with, they're like, "You really are the only one that will go out on a limb and try something different. Everyone else wants to see how it performs and then they'll, they'll jump in and they'll do it." I joke about the pilea, because I'm like, you know, "Everybody in the world's gonna be growing pilea over the next year because they saw it at Trader Joe's."

Matt: So that cost should come way down.

Maggie: (laughs)

Tara: There's a flower that we had in the store last year that I'm pretty sure we're bringing back this year. Um, and I'm still not sure... Is it a tulip or is it a peony?

Maggie: Peony Tulips!

Tara: OK, so it's both, and that's not something I'd seen anywhere else.

Maggie: I was really thinking about our Double Dozen Tulip success that we had last year. I don't know, for some reason I just kinda hit me, I was like, how come nobody's ever referred to it as the peony tulip, because within the floral industry it's been known as the Peony Tulip for, for as long as I can remember. So I decided to work with some of our bulb suppliers, and specifically do a double peony tulip for this Mother's Day. Who says you can't have peonies for Mother's Day? I think it's gonna do really, really well.

Tara: I'm excited about that.

[Phone rings]

Maggie: Hi, Tara and Matt!

Matt: Through the magic of podcast editing, we're actually going to jump ahead a bit

[Fast-forward noise]

Matt: Since that conversation with Maggie, now we're going to catch up with her in a different part of the country in Miami working with a bouquet supplier.

Maggie: A lot of moms are going to be very happy this Mother's Day.

Matt: When you think about a bouquet of flowers, it's more like a prepared dish in a restaurant than you might realize. There's a recipe and that recipe calls for specific ingredients. That recipe calls for a focal point stem, like the thing that really catches your attention. But it also calls for some filler stems and some other accents stems. Let's check this out and see what Maggie is going to do at this supplier, because they're going to build a recipe that then is replicated over and over again that'll be perfect for mom's day.

Maggie: What do you think of that though? That's not bad.

Supplier: I like this, but together? No.

Maggie: Yeah.

Supplier: Just one color. Either this or that.

Maggie: Red is such a... People don't understand like you want red roses for Valentine's Day, but they're produced 365 days a year. So what does a grower do with all of the red outside of Valentine's Day when Mother's Day, everybody wants color? 'Cause it's such a pretty color combination. Okay. So we got hot pink, light pink, two red roses, one purple and one orange, orange slash yellow if you have to swap out. I think we're good. I think it looks really good.

Supplier: It's gorgeous. This is probably one of my favorites.

Maggie: All right guys. I'm happy. We're done with Christmas. We're done with Thanksgiving. We've got Mother's Day. We have Easter done. Um, we have anything else coming up to look at...? I think we're pretty good.

[Picking up a phone receiver]

Maggie: I'll let you get back to the podcast. Take care everybody.

Tara: Okay, Maggie.

Matt: Thanks for checking in with us and we're so glad that you're doing work now so that we're all ready for mom's day when it comes up.

Tara: So one of the things that really sets Trader Joe's apart when it comes to flowers and plants is that we have Crew Members who are completely dedicated to making sure that the flower and plant selection in their stores reflects their neighborhood.

Matt: We're at the Glendale, California Trader Joe's, and we're actually just outside of the Trader Joe's. And I'm here with Miggi, Crew Member, longtime Crew Member, and we're going to talk about flowers.

Miggi: I love plants and flowers. I have, you know, stay at home moms. I have gardeners, I have a local homeowners in Glendale that come by that buy our plants talking about what a great deal it is. They're going to, you know, re-pot all of their plants in the front yard. Orchid buyers that come in that buy, they don't buy one or two. We're talking a box, a case at a time.

Tara: Why? Why are they buying so many?

Miggi: Well, the price point is unbelievable. You can buy a Cymbidium in a basket for 19.99. You go to any of the other...[retailer]...Starting price point 30 to 40 dollars for a Cymbidium in a basket.

Matt: So what is a day like when you're wearing the floral hat? I'm thinking of like the fruit hat must be like Carmen Miranda's, but this is a different hat, it's the floral hat.

Miggi: When I get here it's usually about six in the morning. It's like I've got my cup of coffee and I'm ready to go. I've got three paletts staring at me. I've got empty buckets.

Matt: What are some of the things on those paletts? Three paletts of...?

Miggi: I have bouquets, 3.99 bouquets, 5.99 bouquets, 9.99 bouquets. I have our single stem variety. I have plants and I have our orchids.

Tara: Would you go through that much stuff in a day?

Miggi: Yes.

Miggi: Mother's Day here is phenomenal just to, you know, get yourself a cup of coffee, a lawn chair, and just watch people.

Matt: We could sell tickets.

Miggi: You could; it would be worth the ticket price.

Matt: Nobody loves a mother like Glendale.

Miggi: There you go. That's "Hashtag Yo Mama."

Tara: So Matt, the time has come.

Matt: It is time?

Tara: The time has come. It's the time that everybody waits for when we talk about new products that are coming into the store in the coming weeks and months.

Matt: That time. Ok, that time.

Tara: I have one that I'm really excited about. It is called Neapolitan Joe Joe's Ice Cream. You're familiar with the Neapolitan Joe-Joe's Cookies.

Matt: I am all too familiar with those cookies. But yes, I know what you're talking about.

Tara: Vanilla and strawberry ice cream and instead of chocolate ice cream, it has chocolate fudge pieces and dark chocolate swirl. And then it has pieces of Neapolitan Joe-Joe's Cookies.

Matt: Perfect.

Tara: Thankfully, it's seasonal, so I won't be able to have it all year, but, well, I can have it. I'm looking forward to having it and that should be coming out, you know, late spring, early summer.

Matt: Okay. I'm going to see your ice cream treat and raise you another dessert-y treat. We have a Mochi Cake Mix. Mochi is, it's really a staple in Japanese cuisine. It's glutinous rice. It's a, it's a type of rice, short grain rice that's pounded and it becomes this weirdly interesting, wonderfully springy elastic thing. And this cake mix is made with the same kind of rice material that Mochi, like Mochi wrapped ice cream treat is made, but you actually bake it. And so it looks almost like you would be making a brownie. But the thing itself looks nothing like a brownie. It's lighter in color and it has like a wonderful sort of rich, buttery vanilla flavor. And it has this really interestingly strange and wonderful texture. That's the Mochi Cake Mix.

Tara: It's a little bit confusing because it is a gluten free cake mix, but it's made with glutinous rice.

Matt: Yeah. It's the adjective form of the word. It's not talking about what it is. It's talking about describing what it's like.

Tara: Right. So it's sticky.

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: Anyone looking for a gluten free dessert... It's a really cool option. It's delicious. Moving into a different type of product, Protein Pancake Mix. You just add water and you make your pancakes and there's like, there's 10 grams of protein in a serving of pancakes. I made it for my family, you know, several times and everybody really liked it. It just tastes like a really good pancake. What else is coming?

Matt: Tumeric has been, you know, on so many people's minds. It's that vibrant, bright yellow rhizome. It looks like a tuberous root kind of thing. It looks almost like ginger. Um, it has its own very specific flavor. So many things with Tumeric have been popular and we get a lot of requests for that. We have what's known as golden milk coming. Now there's a whole future podcast that we might go into, like why things should or shouldn't or can or can't be called milk anymore. But the product we have will actually be called Tumeric, Ginger, Coconut Beverage, a bit of a prosaic name for sure, but it's basically golden milk. It's a non-dairy version of this. So it's made with coconut milk. That should be out pretty soon.

Tara: One of those products that I find really interesting that's coming is a Bloody Mary Salsa, and it doesn't have vodka in that, people, there's no vodka in the Bloody Mary Salsa.

Matt: It's focused and built on and around tomato, and it has a wonderful tomato flavor and that tomato flavor gets amplified by celery, and then it's got some spiciness too. I'm not a big drinker of Bloody Mary's, but I could eat a lot of this salsa. It's really tasty.

Tara: One of the most adorable packages I've ever seen coming at Trader Joe's is for the new Patio Potato Chips.

Matt: It's a really cute cute package.

Tara: There's a barbecue chip, a sea salt and vinegar chip, a chip that is homestyle ketchup flavored and they really do taste like ketchup. It's kind of awesome and a delicious dill.

Matt: The first time you're working through the bag eating it, it takes some doing to figure out which chip is which flavor, and that's fun because it's a little bit of a guessing game.

Tara: This is not something we're going to have in this store every day. So if you buy them and you find yourself liking them, I do recommend that you go back and get some more because they're not going to be there forever. It's kind of a summer season special. Okay. What else? The folks who are responsible for sourcing coffee for us, they're really looking for these kinds of things that you just won't find in other places. We have this new, organic coffee coming from Ethiopia. It's called organic Ethiopian Peaberry Hambayleigh Estate Small Lot Coffee. It's from a single estate in Ethiopia, and it is a specific type of bean called a peaberry.

Matt: A peaberry is sort of a, it's a botanical anomaly, right? So it's how the coffee cherries form and the little seed within it and not even 5% of a given crop winds up being a peaberry, so when you look at coffee beans and they look like they're sort of split in half, um, usually there are two halves (makes sense) within each coffee cherry. A pea berry is a single seed or a single, I mean, using the word bean, that's what we all say. But coffee isn't a bean, but there's a single peaberry bean seed inside that coffee cherry. And why would you do that? There are some that say that those peaberries because of how they grow, that they have a different concentration of flavor, that they have some admittedly nuanced differences flavorwise. And I just think it's kind of fun. It's just that much more special to say, you know, this is, you know, the cream of the crop if you will.

Tara: This particular coffee has never been offered outside of Ethiopia ever before.

Matt: Ever.

Tara: Ever.

Matt: Ethiopia is often pointed to and thought of as one of the birthplaces, if not the birthplace of coffee, where you know, the apocryphal story at this point is there's a goat herd out wandering and for some reason his goats are particularly annoyingly energetic one afternoon because they've been eating coffee.

Tara: (chuckle)

[Frantic goat bray]

Matt: Annoyingly energized goats.

Tara: Okay, podcast listeners, we have a favor to ask.

Matt: We call this Inside Trader Joe's and we're hoping that there's a little bit of inside information that you'd like to know more about. So ask us some questions.

Tara: What do you want to know? What is it about Trader Joe's that you don't know? We are going to produce an episode that revolves around asking questions of the people who can make things happen here at Trader Joe's. So if you're so inclined, send us an email to podcast questions at Trader Joe's Dot Com (podcastquestions@traderjoes.com). That's podcast questions at Trader Joe's dot com (podcastquestions@traderjoes.com), and we'll fit in as many questions as we can produce in this, this upcoming episode.

Matt: We're all ears.

Tara: This episode was beautiful. You heard about so many flowers and plants on this episode, but if you want to SEE some of them... Well, come to Trader Joe's or you could follow us on Instagram.

Matt: Another beautiful sight? All those ratings and reviews for Inside Trader Joe's on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. That's very kind.

Tara: It would also be kind if you'd hit that free subscribe button.

Matt: It is free and worth every penny. We'll deliver another podcast soon.

Tara: And until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.