

GROWING THE MENU

Milaeger's has found new and unique ways to get customers coming into the garden center on a regular basis.

By Abby Kleckler

No celebration is complete without food, so why should a shopping experience be any different?

Garden centers need that extra something, and at Milaeger's — with locations in both Racine and Sturtevant, Wisconsin — food gets customers of all ages in the door during every month of the year.

Some of the most successful initiatives at Milaeger's are microgreens, a farmer's market, cafés and events.

Younger Viewpoint, Younger Veggies

As Milaeger's celebrates its 55th anniversary this year, Kara Kading, a third-generation family

member and manager, is grateful for the different age groups in the business.

"I try to look at everything from a perspective of someone who is my age — I'm 36 — and younger," Kading says.

"What do people think when they walk in? Is something overwhelming? Is this easy to understand?"

Kading says that she sees the younger generation too rushed to walk around, read information and take notes.

For these reasons, the Milaeger's team plants inspiration containers and has sections such as the "Best of the Midwest," no-brainer perennials.

Kading's younger cousin David Milaeger — he's 31 — joined the business three years ago and has helped spearhead Milaeger's microgreens program.



This series — Fresh Perspectives — provides garden center tips from Generations X and Y. Kara Kading was a member of GPN's 40 Under 40 Class of 2014. For more information, visit www.gpnmag.com/40-under-40.

Milaeger's grows its own microgreens in one of its more than 90 greenhouses before they are showcased in soups, salads and sandwiches at the Java Garden Café, located in Milaeger's Racine store (shown) and Sturtevant store.



"We're doing more and more growing on the property because we think that's really one of the biggest areas of opportunity," Kading says. "People can walk out to the greenhouse, see that what's growing doesn't have any pesticides or chemicals and know that it's fresh."

Milaeger's also has a small trial garden of vegetables and offers tours to show people what the plants look like and how to space them out.

Microgreens workshops and grow-your-own classes have taken edibles to a whole new level at Milaeger's, according to Kading.



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FRESH PERSPECTIVES

HOLIDAYS ON RECORD

Milaeger's completely transforms around the holiday season and has even found a niche in one unexpected area: high-end collectible ornaments.

"A lot of these ornaments could be \$250, so collectors don't want to just look at a flat picture," says Kara Kading, Milaeger's manager. "They want to know how big it actually is, what the color really looks like and what the face looks like."

From these desires came Kading's idea for short videos. Each ornament has its own video, and Kading turns it around, talks about the colors and explains why it was named what it was.

"We used to spend so much time on the phone trying to describe to people what the ornaments look like," Kading says. "Our customers are so appreciative of that little extra level of education from the videos, and it's really set us apart from every other retailer with collectible ornaments."

The videos are a one-shot deal, quick takes that aim to appear as natural as possible.

This is the same philosophy that Kading has for short YouTube videos that go out in weekly emails and let customers know what is going on at Milaeger's.

"This is such a great opportunity because you're not only providing them with a product they can enjoy, but also educating them," she says. "It benefits everyone."

Gathering at the Market

Milaeger's discovered a new way to cater to a generation interested in knowing where their food comes from: a farmer's market.

The year-round, weekly market brings the community together and features 40 vendors either outside during the summer or inside the greenhouse during the winter.

"We've created an environment where not only do people get the products and food they need, but they also get an experience of being able to hang out here," Kading says. "Right from the get-go the market has been well-received and well-trafficked, and it's good to get people in the store on a weekly basis."

The farmer's market is for people of all ages and that's exactly what Kading has observed.

"With this it's been eye-opening to see, 'Oh my gosh, these people are my age and they're coming to the store,'" she says. "We do free kid's activities during the farmer's markets that really encourage families to come too."

From Morning to Night

The cafés at both stores have evolved since opening approximately 12 years ago. Most recently, they have become the perfect places to debut the grown-on-site microgreens and other vegetables.

From one-time hungry shoppers to a daily group of faithful lunch-goers, the cafés keep busy.

"When the store might not be as busy, especially in the winter months, people are still coming in to get their coffee and to have breakfast or lunch," Kading says. "The advertising you don't pay for is so powerful — people are talking to their friends and saying 'I'm going to Milaeger's for lunch.'"

The company got its liquor license, so events such as "Taco Thursday" give customers the option to wander in the greenhouse with a glass of wine or a margarita in hand.

Although some tried-and-true events always have their place, don't expect things to be the same every time you walk in the store.

"We have customers that come in almost on a daily basis, so if you don't have fresh stuff, they get bored," Kading says. "We've done lots of promotions and events that haven't gone well, but you can't let that take the wind out of your sails. Some things work and some things won't." **LGR**