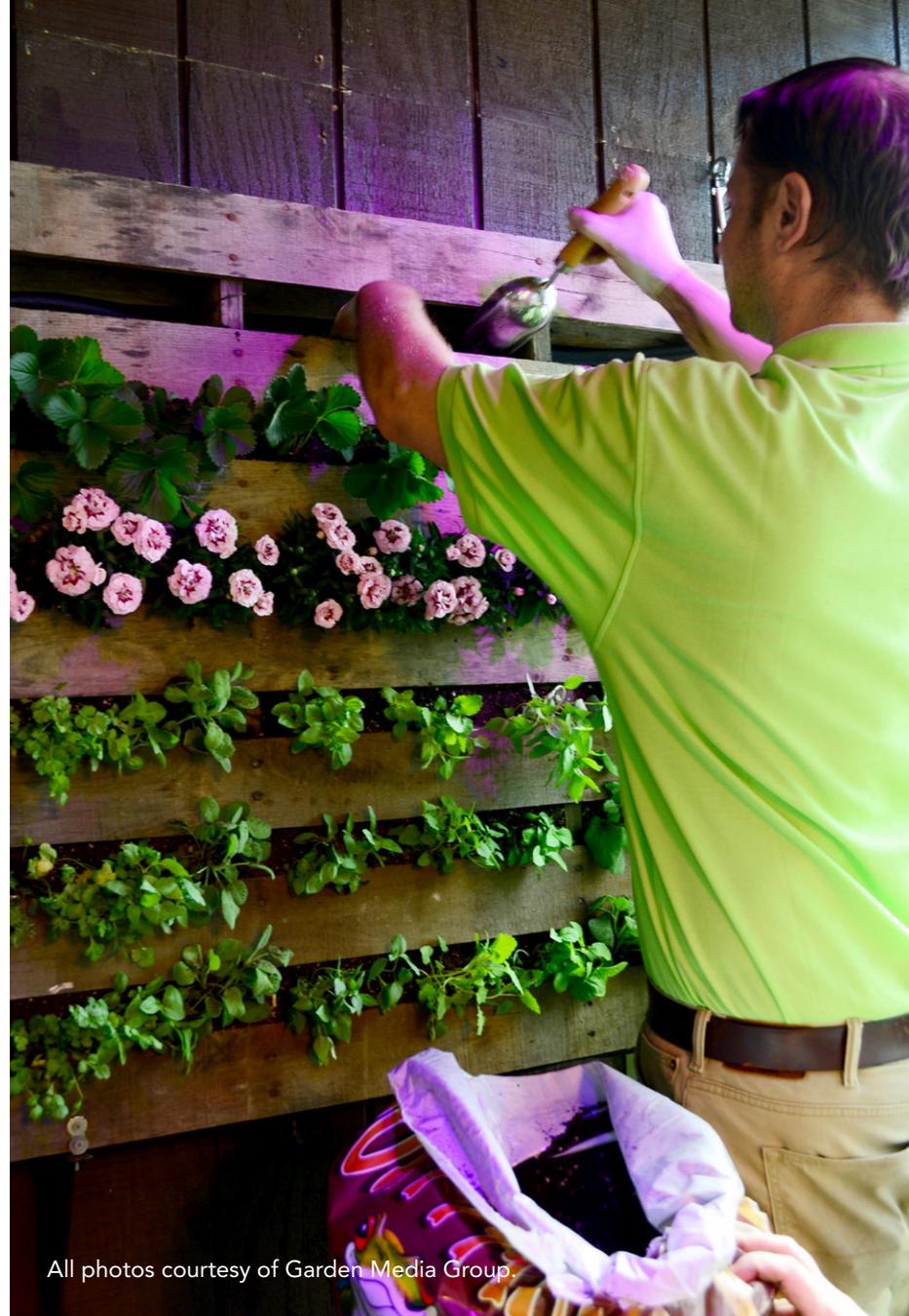


BRINGING GARDENING INDOORS

A new garden center department called Modern Homesteading at Homestead Gardens in Maryland has seen lots of traffic.

By Abby Kleckler



All photos courtesy of Garden Media Group.

In a seasonal industry, a non-seasonal department that has a modern look and attracts customers of all ages, particularly a younger shopper, seems promising.

This is exactly what Brian Riddle, owner of Homestead Gardens near Annapolis, Maryland, has created with its Modern Homesteading department.

The 2,500-square-foot area opened in March and features products for indoor gardening, food production, beekeeping, aquaponics and much more.

In this Q&A, Lawn & Garden Retailer spoke with Riddle about what he's seen so far and the potential he sees for the industry in this emerging category.

LGR: What got you started and why did the idea of “modern homesteading” appeal to you and your business?

Brian Riddle: Since I rejoined the family business in 2011 I've been naturally taking a fresh look at all the things that we do and trying to find ways to improve what works and how to maybe move away from things that aren't working and restructure them. And I've always been keen on trying to create year-round departments that help bring foot traffic in the door.

I've felt strongly that our store does a great job with conversion but getting them in the door is the largest challenge, and I think from what I've learned from my contacts and study in

our industry is that's where we're all having the greatest challenge is maintaining that foot traffic.

In that realization we have been looking at ways to reconfigure the store, and Clint Albin [from Garden Media Group] started to share this idea in the indoor gardening category about a year and a half ago, so we started to explore some other indoor gardening retail businesses and get a little better understanding of what the category involves.

I was very skeptical and sort of fell into the stereotype where I just didn't think that that was the category I was interested in until I better understood it.

Through this journey I've realized there was a huge opportunity not only to create a year-round category but to also introduce a different customer to our store and also take our existing customers and introduce them to an entirely different way to garden that's in many ways more flexible and more conducive to the community that we are growing into as the density where our business is based is pretty dense.

The traditional growth in our garden center is kind of subsiding with virtually no more housing developments being put in; it's more going apartments and condos. This gives us an opportunity to serve people in those types of residential settings that still have a passion and a desire to grow.

LGR: What type of customer does this department appeal to?

Riddle: It's still very preliminary, so I don't want to be overconfident in my evaluation, but what I'm seeing right now and the biggest highlight is that we're seeing a younger customer and certainly creating a younger audience that's interested.

I think that is yet another problem that many garden centers are faced with; our core customer is an aging customer and so I think we've seen a very diverse customer and at this point we've seen very little of the assumed customer, if you would, or the stereotype.

Through our educational programs and our introduction, we've seen a very broad base of people coming and certainly we're getting some younger people, and I think that's a real win.

LGR: Speaking of educational programs, you have 15 seminars that go through the end of July. What role does the educational component play in getting people interested in modern homesteading?

Riddle: I think we're trying to create an information/educational series of events to really help highlight all of the different applications of what we call modern homesteading. To give this new department sort of a full-circle, well-rounded approach, we knew indoor in itself was not going to be enough to support what we have, an entire department and the staff that comes with it.

It's beekeeping, it's composting, it's various aspects of indoor gardening — it could be

