

A DISTINCTIVE STORY

Congratulations to Distinctive Gardens for being crowned Lawn & Garden Retailer's 2016 Merchandiser of the Year.

By Abby Kleckler

Continuously asking yourself and your team where you want to take the business in the future can do a world of good. This exact question is what led owners Bud and Lisa LeFevre to make some major changes to Distinctive Gardens in Dixon, Illinois, after 17 seasons of business.

Their answer to this question had many parts: Take it down to the basics. Give people what they want. Attract younger gardeners. Make gardening fun. Be relevant.

Executing these ideas led to the garden center's Shop Story concept, which creates a completely new theme for each season throughout the garden center.

Lawn & Garden Retailer sat down with Lisa LeFevre to get an inside look at how the 2016 Merchandiser of the Year is creating experiences and building connections.

LGR: Crafting a Shop Story that completely transforms every few months is very different from what you were doing in the past. Why did you decide you wanted to make such a drastic change, and how did you come up with the Shop Story concept?

Lisa LeFevre: We've been noticing over the last several years our customer base is evolving and we're also seeing signs in terms of how our sales are fluctuating. Gift sales were slumping.

We did kind of traditional gift items, and there was less emphasis being placed on our bread and butter products, plants, in that space. The amount of time that it was taking to maintain it and merchandise it was really a liability in the long run.

Over the years we had heard, "I have to go through your shop two or three times because I don't see everything."

While it might have made a "Wow" impression, we started to question how functional it was, and if it was really working in an optimal way.

The whole gang got together to brainstorm [in January], and we were looking at the numbers and cooking up some ideas.

I had some overall goals. Simplifying was a major goal because it seems like for a lot of people, in terms of shopping, the overstimulation type of experience is not working as well as it could.

Plus, we're missing the boat when we're not even focusing on the plants themselves. That's where we are making the money in the business.

Some bigger garden centers I'm sure can handle that type of the business, but for us, we're small, and it really doesn't make sense to be putting so much energy into categories that just don't have the margins for us. And in the long run, it can turn into a liability because you can't turn that merchandise over well enough to sustain and keep everything looking really fresh.

We wanted to move away from that and we wanted to place emphasis on plants, and we wanted to strip down the experience of the shop and really shine a light on the community aspects of the business.

That's where this whole idea of Shop Story kind of started.

LGR: What did people experience when they walked into the store during your first Shop Story, "Transform," from April to July?

LeFevre: In terms of the aesthetic and the redesign, it was pared down to a very simple visual experience, and then we wanted to emphasize plants, community and fold in an educational component.

It seemed like "Transform" was an obvious choice for the first story because we really wanted to place emphasis that we're retooling, there's a brand new experience and we've changed the place.

"Transform" also fit really well into the horticultural component, which was the emphasis we were placing on monarchs and monarch plants. We had that whole monarch wall which told the story about the transformation process of the monarch. That was pretty cool to see people interacting with that. All sorts of conversations were coming



BE INSPIRED

When trying to decide what big changes to make at Distinctive Gardens, Lisa LeFevre and her team looked no farther than other retailers who were doing some things well.

"We had four big tiers of ideas: Story in New York City, Apple, plants and community," LeFevre says.

Story completely overhauls its space every four to six weeks. (Learn more about this at www.lgrmag.com/article/outside-vines-surprise-delight.)

"Story was a big influence," LeFevre says. "You're immediately inundated with what they're trying to communicate. All of their visuals are like 'Bam!' and they communicate that whole brand so well digitally."

As for Apple, the simplified merchandising and giving each product its own special attention made sense in the garden center.

Add in plants and the unique community around Distinctive Gardens, and you have the store's Shop Story execution.

MERCHANDISER OF THE YEAR — WINNER



from interacting with the different displays that we had in the shop.

The pollinator sales were super strong two years running now because this whole monarch thing started last year for us and we extended it this year. That was kind of a no-brainer for us.

Products were getting presented as if they were special. The air plant wall was one that I had done a little analysis on, and I can't believe last January you probably couldn't even see our tillandsia display because it was just piled in with all sorts of other stuff.

Those plants, in and of themselves, are a challenge to display, but they're so unusual and unique they almost require that you treat them like they're little works of art. We wanted to create something that highlighted them, made them feel special and also was very functional, fun and simple, so that particular display commands a lot of square footage in our small shop, but it has been very productive.

I just love how there's this really simplified and very personal approach. Our point of sale helps support that and makes it possible for us to do that because we can be right there with the people, at the displays.

We have iPads and phones for point of sale. We're completely mobile. We don't have to have a cash register line, and we're really trying to eliminate the dreaded checkout experience. We can scan barcodes that are right there where we're standing.

I can't emphasize strong enough how valuable this mobile point of sale is. And it's readily available to any little IGC that wants to explore that. There's really no need for old-school cash registers anymore.

The customers are really appreciating it, and it's funny because you'll hear people bring their

friends in and say, "You don't have to worry about bringing it up, they'll come ring you up right here."

One of the things I personally experience when I go into different places is I want to have a place to think or a place to do my thing in terms of my shopping behavior. I want to set my plants down, design. If I don't have space to be able to accomplish that, it makes it difficult to shop.

Out in the greenhouses, we've made sure we have plenty of space and benches that are open. A couple years ago we named them "Creation Stations," and people adapted right away and were using them and laying out their stuff.

We emphasized that even more this year when we redesigned the space. We're not operating on that idea that every square foot has to be packed with products because part of that whole experience for the customer is to be able to think.

It's valuable, although it may sound counterintuitive, in order to allocate space for thinking.

LGR: How does the Shop Story extend beyond the in-store shopping experience for customers?

LeFevre: We're seeing customers starting to reach out to us through multiple channels, so when we're building these things we're trying to think in terms of products, community experience and education, and then we anchor them with one big event per story and then a lot of project parties to emphasize that social component.

That's a thing that's just blown up for us. The whole idea of classes, or what we call project parties, and that social component is incredibly important right now. People are really coming to places like ours to experience a sense of community or that social aspect or to learn something.

A BIG BREAK

In April 2011, Distinctive Garden was one of five small businesses to receive a Big Break: a trip to Facebook headquarters for a two-day, one-on-one business makeover and \$20,000 to help grow their business with social media, sponsored by American Express and the social media site.

People had to vote for the businesses that came out on top. Owner Lisa LeFevre says she was so surprised that a garden center in the small town of Dixon, Illinois, with a population of approximately 16,000, could win.

"The people were just coming out in droves and writing about our business and a big huge light bulb went on in our heads: 'Oh my goodness, we're more than just a business selling a widget in our town. And people are valuing us as people and as an experience,'" she says.

"The whole Shop Story execution is moving us in the direction wrapping that idea up in a good package and positioning ourselves in a way where we can more readily dig into the idea of our business as being a part of a community. It seems to me that that old Main Street kind of feel is what people are looking for."



MERCHANDISER OF THE YEAR — WINNER



There's something beyond shopping that I think is a growing important component of running a small business. You really have to be integrated into the community.

The story we're running right now is "Community," and for us that too was a no-brainer because we knew this was going to be our story anchored on [the music festival that takes place on the grounds] Gardenstock. We have also been consigning artists for a long time to carry their work, and this works very well with them.

The thing I think is so exciting is that you don't have to be a big, huge corporation to have access to this stuff.

That's probably one of the most revolutionary and powerful aspects of all of this change is that the little guy can have this state-of-the-art, mobile point of sale. The little guy can know specifically who's coming to visit their website. The little guy can build a website online.

You don't have to command all these massive resources and extensive knowledge in order to get what I think are going to become even more critical components of running a small business. **LGR**

MAJOR KUDOS

This year's panel of judges had a tough choice, with a record-setting number of entries and creativity abounding. Here are words from some of our judges on why Distinctive Gardens caught their attention.



The creative positioning of a centralized theme bodes well with any retailer. Appearance is very clean and organized with good spacing and sufficient lighting inside the main store. Effectiveness of display reaches consumers to learn about nature and show the evolving story about the monarchs. The air plant display has multi levels and is positioned low enough for interest by children. Greenhouse display has a nice vertical mobile that would promote interest and attract attention due to motion by air movement. – **John Johnston, Griffin**



The use of the blackboard paint combined with the rustic décor creates a great natural feel. This is not an expensive approach ... just an expense of creativity. Their description of how the entire staff met and were involved in this process makes such a difference in teamwork. This sharing of The Story provides more than selling a product. It can show the vision and character of the business itself, its staff and owners and provides a special advantage to be different. Great work Distinctive Gardens ... maybe you should consider becoming Story Gardens! – **Danny Summers, The Garden Center Group**



I was impressed by the "relevance" of their displays and how they compared with what other mass retailers are doing. I appreciated that signage was informative and that all displays across the retail space were connected by a single Shop Story theme, thus creating a cohesive experience for a customer to fall into and understand. This is a retailer who "gets" it. – **Lauren Snyder, AmericanHort**



I think they knocked it out of the park with their design and concepts for this space. I love the opportunity they have created with their Shop Story concept utilizing innovative storyboards throughout the store that regularly change. The concepts not only connect and resonate with the consumer, but they allow them to insert themselves into the space. The Monarch Magnet display is fantastic. Not only is the display beautiful, it very quickly and simply educates the consumer and allows them to purchase their own Asclepias plants to support the monarch cause. – **Jessica DeGraaf, Proven Winners**



In addition to the in-store merchandising, the theme is carried through in their advertising, website and social media to build overall synergy and to leverage the combined power of a single message. This merchandising strategy hits on a number of consumer trends ... "local," "community," "entertainment" and "interactive," all appealing to not only their existing core customers, but to the new Millennial consumer they want to attract. – **Stan Pohmer, Pohmer Consulting Group**

DISTINCTIVE GARDENS WILL RECEIVE ...

As Merchandiser of the Year, Distinctive Gardens receives the brand new Damm 60114 RainSelect/One Touch Hand Watering Display (MSRP \$2,365) and a \$500 Wholesale Gift Credit and a 15 percent discount for Braun Horticulture's 2016 Catalog offering (one time).

BRAUN
HORTICULTURE

DRAMM