

# INSPIRING

## through edible exhibitions

Consider educational museum exhibits to help you create a clearer message about what you're trying to sell.

By Vicki Nowicki

**W**hether you are an advertiser, an exhibit designer or a retail store manager, your first set of questions should always be:

What is your image?

What is your message?

Who is your audience/consumer base?

We have a new generation of vegetable gardeners in America today. They no longer want to plant their parents' preordained hybrid tomato and stuffing pepper. They are experimenting with everything from square-foot gardening to raised beds, from lasagna gardening to compost tea. They want organic plants and organic controls. They want heirloom varieties and they want gourmet varieties. And to top it off, they are passionate!

They likely belong to a movement — The Slow Food Movement or The Local Food Movement. You name it, they have a reason for growing their own food. The majority are 25 to 45 years old. And the first-time gardeners are still increasing along with the steady rise in sales of vegetable plants and seeds year after year.

So, back to those questions I started with. What is the complex image and message of the independent garden center in this day and age?

I stopped in to my local garden center the other day just to see what was going on.

When I visit, I'm always hoping for some kind of longitudinal feedback just to be reassured that growth and prosperity are indeed taking place in the vegetable world.

### The Vegetable Museum

Having worked in the museum field for years developing exhibits that attracted and taught visitors about otherwise anonymous objects, I remember doing research on family museum visits.

I remember trying to develop the big picture of an exhibit with an image and a message. Is this what is missing from the garden center? Does your store or display lack a big message?

People come to museums for many reasons. One reason they go is to get information. Parents feel compelled to pass information down to their children. Folks at museums, like advertisers, have developed complex and effective ways to help people learn and remember information. Their motives are high-minded. For purposes of selling,

however, advertisers know that learning about a product promotes sales.

What if we could set up the vegetable displays like educational museum exhibits, thus creating a clearer message about what we're trying to sell? It's not really that outrageous of an idea.

### It's All In The Exhibit

Here are just a few exhibit strategies that are used by museums that you might be able to put into use at your shop:

**1.** The first reason children learn so well in the museum is because they are with their families. This creates a good feeling called a "high effect." That good feeling increases their learning curve.

Vegetable gardens conjure up memories of Grandma, old-fashioned recipes and so forth. As a backdrop to your displays, consider mounting some large black-and-white photos of grandmas (yours or customers) in their Victory Gardens with maybe a "bulletin board" of depression era recipes for green beans or pumpkins, etc. Research shows that the new generation of vegetable gardeners wants first and foremost to get information from family members but it is the last place they are able to find it. Any connections to family and generations past will create an atmosphere that is emotionally positive.

**2.** Set up a demonstration raised-bed garden with a simple timeline posted behind it showing how to succession plant all through the year and then model doing it. Kits are inexpensive. Maybe a garden club would be willing to maintain it and have fun in the process. Also, vendors are willing to grow throughout the summer. Make sure they are growing the varieties that do well in your area.

It wouldn't hurt to display photos of



Barlow's Flowers, Sea Girt, NJ

Become your community's biggest produce advocate by offering up your location as a local CSA pickup spot or contract a farmer to sell their locally grown vegetables at your store once a week. Customers can then have a taste of what they might grow.





Cooking demonstrations are a great way to show off the delicious potential of your edible inventory. Work with local chefs to cross-promote each other's businesses and increase interest.

(Photos provided by Jessica Holvay, Gethsemane Garden Center.)



positive models like local figures and their gardens and invite customers to bring in pictures of their gardens for that bulletin board. Modeling is one of the most effective educational techniques.

**3.** Set aside or section off a learning place. Use an inexpensive gimmick like a gate, a banner, an archway — anything that says you are now entering the “vegetable place.” This place should be special and focused on showing customers things that are vegetable and herb exclusive.

**4.** Use an organizing principle to set up your vegetable displays. For example, and just for fun, organize the plants according to a homemade pizza recipe, which would include tomatoes, peppers (sweet and hot), zucchinis, broccoli, oregano, basil, cookbooks, pizza pans, slicers and so forth.

These are just four of the many ways to get out some messages about vegetables that will be helpful to consumers and, in addition, will help them feel that their success is important.

## More to Consider

There was a time when the IGCs were actually the only game in town for the burgeoning suburban communities during the housing boom. If we think back to the image they held at that time, I believe we thought of them as the place to go to set up our new landscape. We could buy our woody plants, perennials, bedding plants, seeds, lawn mower, etc.

Of course, we all know what happened. Enter those pesky big boxes. Today, I still think there is a chance of becoming a place that is a hub of activity and you don't have to break the bank to do it. Remember that gardeners are longing for a place to make contact with other gardeners. The local garden center is a perfect location that can be resurrected for this purpose.

With old photos and old-fashioned recipes of yours or your customers, conjure up old family memories. These are great items for the backdrop to your displays. Any connections to family will create an emotionally positive atmosphere.

Make a plan so that there is some kind of activity happening every week — and not just in the spring! Here are five more ideas:

**1.** In-store events, when promoted right and executed well, can consistently bring in the most traffic. Offer up your location as a local CSA pickup spot, encouraging more people to visit and reinforcing your stance on supporting local organizations.

**2.** With that in mind, ask a farmer to sell fresh vegetables at your location one day a week. Customers can then have a taste of what they might grow.

**3.** Find a local chef who is just starting out and ask him or her to give a demo on cooking fresh vegetables and herbs in exchange for good PR for his/her restaurant.

**4.** Have an occasional motivational promotion. For example, “Plant a row for the hungry” or “Eating local keeps your gas tank full.”

**5.** As previously mentioned, offer local garden clubs to meet at your location. They can pay a small fee or they can do a service project with your plants.

There is nothing stopping you from building your image as a locally involved, relevant retail

establishment that is aware of the needs of its community. Your message could be that you are knowledgeable about your products and are serving as a surrogate for your customers in place of other resources.

It's time to take charge of this vibrant ever-growing market. Sales remain up. Why not take advantage of a market that wants to be bigger? **LGR**

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