

A Tomato Takeover

Lawn & Garden Retailer spoke with Kara Kading, third-generation at Milaeger's, about its annual Tomatomania event at the Racine, Wisconsin, location.

By Abby Kleckler



HOW DID THE EVENT START?

Milaeger's grows more than 100 kinds of tomatoes, but customers would come into the garden center during the spring and be overwhelmed by the number of tomato plants and afraid to try anything new. Tomatomania was born in 2002 as an annual event to give customers an opportunity to taste test every tomato variety blindly — along with more than 40 peppers — to take out the preconceived notion of the varieties they like, helping them branch out.

WHAT CAN ATTENDEES EXPECT?

The tomato lover's festival takes place the Saturday after Labor Day from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the greenhouse. The event and taste testing are free, but attendees — normally around 1,500 people — can purchase food tickets for a number of tomato-centric treats. The head grower handles all the salsas while members of the Milaeger family make pizzas, bruschetta, Bloody Marys, BLT sandwiches, nachos and much more. The whole staff gets involved. There are also community businesses such as a winery, brewery, and live bands, and some vendors from the farmers market held at Milaeger's during other times of the year.



HOW DO YOU TELL PEOPLE ABOUT THE EVENT?

The most important thing is to get the information out early. In the spring, customers can pick up a list of each type of tomato — beefsteak, salad, grape, hybrid, heirloom, etc. — and how each variety ranked within that category by attendees at the last Tomatomania. Also, large posters with just the date and any highlights that have already been decided on go up in the greenhouse during the springtime. People are often caught snapping a photo of the poster, so they can remember the details. The next steps include adding it to the calendar, creating a Facebook event, sharing highlight videos and photos from previous years and then, a couple weeks prior, doing videos out in the fields with the tomatoes growing and revealing the year's T-shirt design. Milaeger's has found that videos and contests get the most interest.

HOW DO YOU KEEP IT FRESH?

With any event that's an annual event, you want to make improvements on it, so it is different enough that people want to come back every year and bring other friends and family. It doesn't have to be a major overhaul if it's a popular and successful event though. Kara Kading says she learned her lesson that way too where you make too many changes and lose your base group because it was their tradition. Some years there's a weigh-in contest for people to bring in tomatoes from their yards or other activities that change to increase crowd participation.

