

FOOD TRUCKS ON THE FARM



Will Heeman, Chief Daymaker at Heeman's in Thorndale, Ontario, spoke with Lawn & Garden Retailer about its largest event of the year: a two-day food truck and kickoff to fall weekend that will celebrate its fifth year in 2018.

By Abby Kleckler



HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA?

The impetus behind it was I was at Cultivate attending a session with Leslie Halleck, and she was talking about how they did a food truck event at their garden center in Texas, and I was like "I can do that." On the drive back from Cultivate I started making some calls. Our first year we ended up doing a date in October, which was not ideal. But it was still a success, and we had a great turnout even with the worst weather. What we learned from that first year is that people loved the idea, but we wanted to tie it into something. That's why the food truck weekend is the weekend after Labor Day because in Canada it's the weekend after kids go back to school, so you get the kids in school, and then "boom," you have to decorate for fall.

WHAT ARE THE LOGISTICS OF THE EVENT?

It's very simple for us because the only things we have to do are bring in live music, set up seating in the greenhouse, arrange extra staff and manage parking because we just line the food trucks up in front of the garden center. We can fit about 250 cars in the parking lot, and the seven food trucks take about 20 to 25 spots. We always run out of parking because it's popular and people stay a long time. This year we really hit our stride; year four is really where everything clicked. We had more trucks, and we turned it into two days. We



always subscribe to a maximize-FOMO [fear of missing out] model, so we only run food truck weekend once a year, and even though it's gangbusters popular and we can do it far more often, I don't want it to lose its special factor.



WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE GARDEN CENTER THAT WEEKEND?

We promote the event as all about the food trucks and then the kick off to fall. In Canada, Thanksgiving is the second weekend in October, so there's much more pressure to get into fall as soon as September hits. We make money by selling our porch packages and strawberries, and then also being the exclusive drinks and dessert place because we have a coffee and ice cream bar. The Porch Package is not an idea that's unique to us, but it's everything for fall decorating. We create a little shopping list and give little pencils like you're at mini-putt, and you can grab from each of the bins. You get two pumpkins, two 9-inch mums, a 9-inch cabbage or kale, two bundles of corn stalks (so basically six corn stalks), three mini gourds or mini pumpkins, and a bale of straw. It's \$40, meaning they save about \$1.75 by buying a Porch Package.

LET'S TALK NUMBERS

Last year we had about 2,000 people on the Saturday and then about 1,700 the second day. The food trucks are only open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and we've been told this is the food trucks busiest event they have, even busier than three- or four-day concerts. When we're looking at that though, I don't care as much about how many people we bring in; I care more about the basket size because that's something my staff can impact. Year three we had 412 transactions in the garden center on food truck weekend, and this year we had 1,452 on the two days versus the one-day event. Our basket size for the weekend on the Saturday was up 20 percent and on the Sunday was up 10 percent. Both days were much bigger than last year, and we did almost just as well on that Sunday as we did on that Saturday. From when we first did the food truck event until the fourth one, we were able to grow sales 1,200 percent on food truck weekend. **LGR**