

Pumpkin Fest

Wasson's Nursery in Fishers, Indiana — the newest of its three garden centers — has created a huge fall event centered around a pumpkin weigh-off of massive proportions. Lawn & Garden Retailer sat down with owner Bob Wasson to learn how the first two years of the event have gone and big plans for the future.

By Abby Kleckler



HOW DID YOUR PUMPKIN FEST START?

Bob Wasson: We were approached by the Indiana Pumpkin Growers Association, and they were having this weigh off somewhere else that no longer was working for them. The association knew we were building a new garden center in Fishers and thought it would be a good idea. We of course said yes. There are 10 to 12 different growers that bring their giant pumpkins in, weighing anywhere from 1,000 to almost 2,000 pounds, and we line them all up. This year we lined them up close to the road so people could see what was going on. They're all on pallets and we have a Bobcat out there to move them around and weigh them on the scale. We pay \$2,500 in prize money, and that's a good number to get pumpkin growers to do the weigh off. The whole weigh off takes about an hour, and they provide an emcee. A lot of people gather around for that, and before the weigh off starts you can go up and touch the pumpkins. It was so popular to set your toddler on top of the giant pumpkin for a photo op. The winning pumpkin stays with us for the next week, so people come and look at it.

WHAT ELSE IS GOING ON DURING THE EVENT?

Wasson: The whole festival or event is tied around those giant pumpkins and has been on the last Saturday of September from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. We have festival games for the kids such as pumpkin bowling or pumpkin mini-putt; a petting zoo; food trucks; a band playing; pumpkin painting and more. The pony rides and the face painting were huge. The event itself is free. We have tickets for everything, so we direct people to go to our welcome table and everyone got five tickets just for coming. They could then buy more tickets, which was a donation to Riley Hospital for Children. This was to generate some sort of order but also to generate some donations. The pony rides were a different kind of ticket though at \$2 per ride. We always want to keep it free, but we want to try to add elements where we can recoup some of the investment, and the pony rides were a good start. The line for the pony rides was so long and was definitely the biggest draw, but face painting was the other huge draw. We had two people painting faces, and it was a constant line of people. We're definitely going to charge a couple bucks a piece next year for that.

HOW DID YOU MARKET THE EVENT?



Wasson: The only marketing we did was emails and free social media. On social media we had over 8,500 people respond to the event, either said they were going or said they were interested, which is the most response and interaction we've ever gotten from anything we've put up. Over 185,000 people were reached, and that's just us setting it up on Facebook as an event. We didn't promote it, boost it or pay any advertising dollars for that. Fox 59 News also did a little plug for us, and I put the winning pumpkin in my pickup truck and drove down to the station where they featured it for us. The publicity we get from it is crazy. We have a parking lot that holds 90 cars, and we basically took ¾ of that and dedicated it to the Pumpkin Fest for the pumpkins out by the road, the weigh off and the petting zoo. You would not believe the streams of people that you see walking down the street as they parked on the street in the suburban neighborhoods all around us. We have two police officers out directing traffic, and it's just a madhouse.

DID YOU PROMOTE FUTURE VISITS AT THIS EVENT?

Wasson: One of the awesome things we did that worked extremely well is that when people came to the welcome table they got a bag with some things inside including envelope, that said, "No peeking. Come back for Christmas." It laid out the details of our Christmas open house event. Inside this envelope was a prize that they could win at the open house like \$500, an iPad, an Apple Watch, in-store gift cards, candles from the store — a bunch of different prize options — all the way down to maybe \$5 off your purchase. The whole deal is that one of our employees has to open the envelope in-store, and we had a numerical code that told the cashier what prize they won, so there was no way the customer could see what it was and know if it was worth coming or not. Every envelope was a winner because a large percentage of them we put in that \$5 off coupon. The number of envelopes we got back at our Christmas open house from Pumpkin Fest was huge. Also, we're trying to establish the fact that we're open year-round and not just a seasonal garden center, so it's really helping build the traffic into the Christmas season. 🍁

