

# It's All About ENGAGEMENT

Consider these fun and innovative ideas for your  
garden center promotions in 2020.

By Jessica DeGraaf

One of the perks of my job is that I get to travel to see dynamic garden centers throughout North America. I'm on planes — a lot. As much as I'd love to regale you with some great stories of life on the road or people's poor etiquette on planes, I'll spare you the details.

I wear Proven Winners gear when traveling and it's always fun to see reactions from fellow travelers. Sometimes it affords me an almost celebrity-like status; translation: I spend an inordinate amount of time looking through other people's camera photo rolls featuring their prized hanging baskets, containers and — if I'm lucky — the family dog!

Other times, people ask me what in the world is Proven Winners. After I've reassured them that I'm not selling a five-step self-help program, most are very interested in learning more about plants and, more importantly, about the garden centers that carry them.

The questions I've gotten from consumers all over the country this past year have made me think about the typical garden center customer. Who exactly are these people? What motivates them to grow plants? What would make them shop more often at their local garden centers?

As you might imagine, I see loads of exciting examples of independent retailers having success with innovative new programs in my travels. I'd like to share three ideas with you here that could be implemented in a way that works for your business in 2020.

## Be Part of the Pollinator Movement

Most of the people I speak with on planes don't define themselves as "gardeners." When asked what a better word would be to describe their love of gardening, they

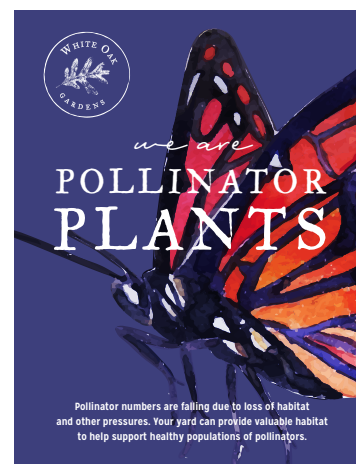
talk about being "environmental stewards" or simply "environmentalists." They care about our planet and are looking for ways to give back.

Our conversation almost always moves on to plants and, more specifically, to plants that attract pollinators. As people learn more about the critical role pollinators play in our ecosystem, adults and children alike are looking for creative ways to support them.

Engaging and educational pollinator displays at garden centers are an excellent way to attract the attention of people interested in supporting the movement. They make it easy for those educated about pollinators to find the plants they are looking for while providing a place to start for those wanting to learn. Signs like the one below from White Oak Gardens in Cincinnati, Ohio, are a great place to start. There is significant palate of plants that can be featured in these displays from spring all the way through frost.

Knowing that supporting pollinators is a key concern of their customers, the team at Molbak's Garden + Home in Woodinville, Washington, created captivating displays and featured the Proven Pollinators program this past year. Plants selected

Signs like this one from White Oak Gardens make it easy for customers to find pollinator-friendly plants.



for the display were chosen based upon their ability to provide a pollen or nectar source for pollinators from spring through fall.

Molbak's merchandised a key focal point in their store featuring plants and props that fully integrated the pollinator theme. In addition, they participated in a pilot program for Proven Pollinators. Their display was fully branded and merchandised to educate and engage consumers. Findings from the study showed that plants displayed in the Proven Pollinators display outsold the same plants merchandised in a separate area 2:1.

### Do You Have a Passport Program?

While this might make you think of sand and warm breezes, sadly, I'm not talking about your next vacation.



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I've spoken with a number of garden center owners this past year who have lamented that their educational sessions or events are stagnating. If you are looking for ways to breathe new life into your education programs, too, you might consider a program that K&W Greenery of Janesville, Wisconsin, has implemented.

This successful full-service IGC crafted a stellar education program their customers love. Each spring, they offer a seven-week educational program that includes a wide range of topics like new varieties, amending your soil, and much more. A passport is provided at the first session; customers who attend at least six sessions earn a stamp on their passport, and a \$20 gift certificate.

*K&W Greenery of Janesville, Wisconsin, crafted a stellar education program.*



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When owner Chris Williams asked me to speak for one of these sessions, I didn't believe him when he said that more than 200 people attend these events in March and early April. That's not exactly the best time to be out and about in southern Wisconsin. But wouldn't you know, over 230 people attended my talk on that cold, snowy Saturday in April. The best part was that many showed up an hour early for the event and stayed well afterward to browse the store and purchase houseplants.

By capitalizing on pent-up demand early in the season, Chris and the team at K&W have been able to increase foot traffic and sales while building loyalty from their customer base.

### Offer Creative Spaces for Kids

When talking with many of my friends who are mothers, the No. 1 reason they shop online is time. When you combine time restraints with the thought of trying to take two or three small children into any store to shop while avoiding public temper tantrums, it's enough to keep them at home. Interestingly, they say they are willing to take their kids to Ikea. When I've asked them why, I have heard a variety of answers, the most popular of which are the delectable Swedish meatballs and the licensed childcare option on site.

Fear not! No one expects you to have licensed daycare at your garden center. There are, however, some great ways to create engaging spaces for children that allow their parent to shop without the fear of an epic impending meltdown.

The team at Koetsier's in Grand Rapids, Michigan, came up with a creative way to engage the kiddos while affording their parents time to shop. They set aside a space within the greenhouse for several age-appropriate play areas. Staffed by a team member or two, depending on the time of the year, children are free to come and play while the adults shop.

*Koetsier's in Grand Rapids, Michigan, set aside a space within the greenhouse for several age-appropriate play areas.*



*Sky Nursery in Shoreline, Washington, created a simple garden hut for kids.*

On a smaller scale, Sky Nursery in Shoreline, Washington, created a simple garden hut for kids. Chock full of books, crayons, paper and more, this is a great space where kids can play for a few minutes and allow Mom or Dad to shop in peace.

While signs that threaten to feed unattended children candy and gift them a puppy are funny, it doesn't make a parent feel like they can bring their littles into your store — and that is exactly what we want them to do! When you create spaces or events that excite children and keep them occupied, families will feel welcome and supported by their local garden center.

## Consider making your 2020 resolution about customer engagement.

Consider making your 2020 resolution about engagement. By creating fun, informative displays, events and opportunities for everyone to get involved, it's a win-win. 🍌

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