



# Happy Hiring

Garden centers share their tips and best practices for hiring — and retaining — great employees.

By Teresa McPherson

The Great Resignation that's taken place over the last two years has made employers re-evaluate how they hire and retain workers.

A new study from recruiting software company Lever, "2022 Great Resignation: The State of Internal Mobility and Employee Retention Report," examines how employers can best attract and retain workers during the Great Resignation, specifically looking at the impacts of internal mobility.

While 40% of employees plan to stay at their current jobs for less than a year, attrition rates are much higher for Gen Z (those born after 1996, according to the Pew Research Center). Sixty-five percent of Gen Z employees reported that they planned to stay for less than a year.

The biggest motivator for employees who planned to stay in their position was salary and/or potential bonuses (46%), followed by good paid time off and flexibility (21%), and internal mobility (13%). While culture is

important to employees, it's no longer the No. 1 factor determining whether they stay or leave.

Of the employees who said they'd stay at their company, 41% planned to ask for some sort of role change in 2022. In fact, nearly a third (31%) said they would take a pay cut to change positions, and three in five (61%) reported that they would start searching for new jobs if their company didn't allow them to switch roles.

"As we enter another year of the Great Resignation, our report found employees are asking for a few simple things in order to stay at their companies," said Nate Smith, CEO of Lever. "Through much of the pandemic there was an immense focus on culture and perks, but as we navigate today's normal, companies should focus on competitive compensation, more personalized working plans, and PTO that can provide needed flexibility. These focuses will define employers with top retention in 2022."

What can garden centers do to recruit — and retain — good employees? Read on to see what practices three IGCs put in place in their stores.

## When do you start hiring retail staff for the spring season?

**J.D. Boone, owner of Dothan Nurseries in Dothan, Alabama:** Our spring really gets started around March 1, and I used to start pulling in some extra part-time people in mid-February, which really was not enough time to get them acclimated. This year, I lined up two or three and got them in around mid-January just to get them acclimated better. There's not quite as much to do then, but if I can get them an extra three or four weeks, it is a lot easier for them when it gets crazy in March and in April.

One thing that works great for us in finding new staff is, first, always be hiring. You always have to be looking when you're out and about. If you're at



the grocery store or a gas station and somebody's good, just say, "Hey, if this doesn't work out, I'm down the road at Dothan Nurseries, give us a call."

The second trick we have learned is this: It's really easy for somebody to sit behind a computer and answer three or four questions and hit send. I'll put a job out on Facebook and the next day have 250 people that have applied, and it's just madness to sort through it all. So now we've gone to having the job posting say, "Here's the link to our website to apply for a job, and the website has what we believe in, and at the bottom a link to print out an application." On Facebook, I say, if you want to be considered for this job, go to the website, read the statement, print out the application, fill it out and bring it to us, and if you don't do that, we're not going to talk to you.

And when we recently put that out, we've only had seven or eight people fill it out and come by, as opposed to the 100 people applying on Facebook. Six out of the eight have been wonderful. I get really good candidates. A person that's going to print it out and fill it out and come by and see me is a lot more apt to be somebody that I'm going to want to work here, as opposed to somebody that's just going to answer three questions and hit send. That's been the biggest thing — to require them to come in and meet us face-to-face, and that way it's not a lot of people that are just fishing.

**Laura Girbach, general manager of KBK Garden Center in Saline, Michigan:** We are very lucky to have a team of great employees that will return year after year. We begin looking to supplement that team in the middle of April.

**Sandi Hillermann McDonald, owner of Hillermann Nursery and Florist in Washington, Missouri:** Generally, we start the first of February, as our season picks up mid-March to April. Most people are looking to start work immediately and it's hard financially to bring them on too soon. This year, though, we have been able to hold onto most of our part-time cashiers through the year, which helped. Our hardest sections for hire are our green goods areas, trees, shrubs, perennials and greenhouse color.

### What do you look for in a new hire?

**Boone:** They have to be happy, without a doubt. They can know everything, but I ask them, "Are you happy? And do you play well with others?" I've hired maybe one or two people ever that knew a lot about plants that were also happy people — not that the two can't come together. But I can hire the best plant person in the world, and if they're not happy, it just doesn't matter at all. I would much rather have somebody that doesn't know a thing about plants but is happy and gets along, and all that good stuff. It

doesn't solve all the problems, but that solves a whole lot of issues because I've never found a person that couldn't learn what they needed to know to do this.

**Girbach:** Enthusiasm and pride. With those two qualities, the rest can be taught.

Work should be fun. It is serious business, but it needs to be something you want to get up and go to every day. We've had the most luck with high schoolers and college students, as they are looking for more seasonal work. We have also been very successful with those in their 50s and above. We find that both ends of the spectrum are very prompt, either very eager to learn or have much knowledge to share.

**McDonald:** Of course, the first trait is friendly, easy approaching people. Happy attitudes. Appearance is another thing we look at. Are they energetic? Do they ask questions? Can they find work to do? Do they play well with others? We will train on the job, so the personality is the most important.

### What does the first day look like for a new employee?

**Boone:** I might do things as nicely and eloquently as I should, but we're doing better. I always tell them, "We're not Publix, we're not Chick-fil-A, I don't have a manual for every single step of every day," but we try to get them with



their department manager and we basically give them an explanation of what they're going to be doing and what's expected. We get them with the department managers and they tail them for the first week or so and see how questions get answered and customers get helped. After the first week or so, we slowly start letting them go to start doing their own thing and doing what they're supposed to be doing in their department.

And I always tell them, once they're out there, "You're never going to do wrong putting down whatever it is you're doing and going up and helping a customer, and if you don't know the answer, that's okay. Be honest with the customer, tell them you just started, you want to help them, let's figure this out." You're not going to know the answer for the first six months; there are 50 questions we get asked all the time, and you're just going to take a while until you have the answers ready to go.

**Girbach:** We have gone to a "trial shift" type of hiring process. Many times, I think, the idea of working in a nursery and garden center sounds appealing, but they really do not understand the physical requirements of the job. Yes, it's fun working with plants and flowers, but it is hot, sweaty, and tough work at times.

A trial shift gives us both the opportunity to see just how we fit together. This has been very successful.

**McDonald:** We perform a full tour of the complex and introductions to fellow employees. Our employee manual is introduced to them, as well as all other documentation needed for our HR department. The job is then described to them, and we set them up with a mentor in their department to shadow the first week.

### What do you do to retain workers?

**Boone:** I try to be as intentional as I can with being invested in not just what they do here at work, but what they do in their life. I try to be, within reason, really flexible with schedules and stuff. I'm always evolving, but my first half of my time here, my first eight years, were sitting in my office and walking around and figuring out what they did wrong and telling him, "We gotta fix that, we gotta fix that, we gotta fix that," which still happens, because that's my personality. But more and more I'm seeing that I have to walk around and point out, "This is great, this is great, that's great, that was great" — and try to outnumber my "We need to fix that" 10 to one with "That looks great" or "You did a good job." So being more positive with the employees, being invested in their personal lives and being as good as we can with the pay. The money helps, too — being on the front end of paying what they're worth and more when I can.

**Girbach:** In my opinion, retaining employees is more than just pay and perks. It is how they are treated. We are a team. We meet as a team every morning. We go through the day, what to expect, raise any concerns we may have or needs we have for extra help. We have clear leadership lines and we encourage new ideas. Gone are the days where employees stay at a company long enough to retire from there; new jobs are popping up everywhere. An employee that feels valued and their opinion matters will have a vested interest in the business and want to see it succeed. If the business succeeds, the employee succeeds.

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**McDonald:** We offer fair pay and flexible hours. This seems to help tremendously to work with the employee. We also offer sales discounts to our employees, which is a huge bonus for many.

**What perks do you offer to staff? Discounts, etc.?**

**Boone:** We give them 50% off everything here, it doesn't matter what. The more of these products they get in their hand, the easier it is for them to sell them to the guests that come in here. When a \$40 tree becomes a \$20 tree, it's a lot easier to buy and to use, so it's good for me that they have it in their hands and can talk better with the customers about it because they've had it and they've used it and they liked it, or they disliked it, and then it's just cheaper for them as well.

And I buy them lunch every Saturday, whatever it may be, Chick-fil-A or pizza or whatever. They always know when they come in on Saturday their lunch is done. That's probably the two main things.

**Girbach:** We do offer store and material discounts for employees and their immediate families. We are also implementing a sick day program. With the dawn of COVID, it has become apparent that employees need to feel there is a safety net for them to take a couple days off when they are ill. I think in the past, employees have felt that they can't take time off to get well for fear of losing their job or some other retribution. I feel that is a systemic syndrome that has grown in all industries over the years. We have had to stop and take stock of what is important and health is of the utmost importance.

**McDonald:** Our perks are different for part-time versus full-time employees; part-time employees receive a very fair wage (above minimum wage) and flexible hours. They receive a 20% discount off green goods and garden center purchases.

Our full-time employees receive health insurance, 401k enrollment, paid holidays and vacation, uniforms (at cost), and awesome discounts on materials. Full-time employees can buy all products at our cost, plus freight. This is a large benefit for them. 🌱

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