



Mother's Day roses and tiaras at Four Seasons Greenhouse and Nursery.

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AVOID HOLIDAY

Burnout

Four garden centers share fun ideas to avoid feeling burnt out during the busy Christmas season.

By Teresa McPherson

When the holiday season is in full swing it can be hard to take a moment and enjoy it. Here, four independent garden centers share their tips and advice for avoiding holiday burnout themselves and for their staff.

Mixing Things up

Gail Vanik and her husband Vic have owned Four Seasons Greenhouse and Nursery Inc. in Dolores, Colorado, since 1998 — that's a lot of holiday seasons! Gail says she adores the holiday season. "I mean, I'm the gal that starts shopping for Christmas in January, so burnout for me has really never happened.

"That being said, with the advent of COVID, our classes exploded in 2020, and since we were trying to have less people in any one class to allow for social distancing, we ended up running classes at 10 a.m., 12 noon, and 2 p.m. every weekend day, so there was no time for a break. Since I teach all of our workshops myself, that did get a little tiresome."

She says that, prior to COVID, they had traditionally taken their staff out for a Christmas breakfast. But when all of the restaurants were closed, they still wanted to have some kind of company holiday party and switched to a potluck breakfast.

“Through that, we discovered we have some amazing cooks! Instead of just a breakfast, I also organized games with prizes for that morning. The games were simple, inexpensive and utilized things that we readily had around the garden center. One of the most popular was a game where we put a line of painters’ tape down the center of an open space in the greenhouse. I blew up 25 red balloons and 25 green balloons. The crew was divided into two teams and when the whistle blew, the first team to have all of their color balloons over the line first won.

“Another game was to have teams compete at wrapping a Christmas present wearing oven mitts. Another one was to hold a paper plate on your head or behind your back and draw a picture of a Christmas tree on it. Last year, I made homemade cookies with a hole in them, suspended them from the supports in the greenhouse and the first one that ate their cookie standing — while having their hands behind their back — won. All simple things using easily obtained props.

The prizes for these games were purchased from our Winter Market vendors in an effort to support them as well,” she says, “so they weren’t your usual ‘prizes.’ For instance, you might have won a pound of bison or ground beef, or a pound of bacon. You may have received some handmade soap, a jar of local honey or a hand-poured candle. One of the prizes was a 2.5-gallon box of fresh apple cider. Fresh fruits and vegetables, cheeses, and more made for an interesting morning.

“I’ll try to mix things up so that they never know what to expect — and perhaps that’s the key to avoiding burnout. I have great fun thinking about new things with which to surprise them.”

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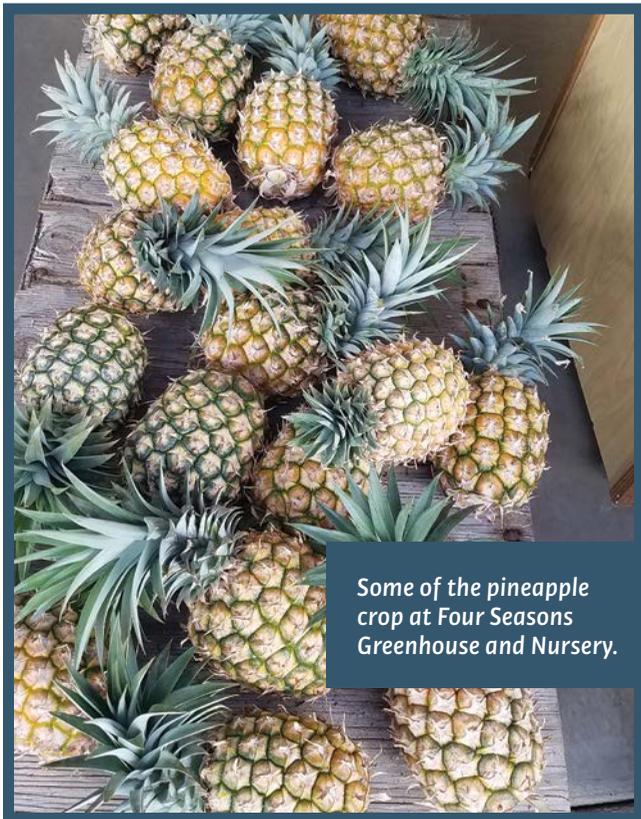
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Some of the pineapple crop at Four Seasons Greenhouse and Nursery.

“In order to be totally objective, I took a fishbowl and put numbers in it that corresponded to the number of prizes I had. I put the prizes themselves into brown paper bags and numbered them. When you or your team won, you got to choose a number out of the fishbowl and then take the bag with the corresponding number. That way everyone had an equal chance. It’s always worked out so that everyone has gotten a meat and a vegetable prize.

“We try to keep things fun for our staff over the holidays, aside from donuts and having lunch brought in. Between the Christmas shop, poinsettia sales, our Luminaria Night, and our Winter Farmer’s Market, it can be a busy and stressful time for them, so one of the things we do is let them make the projects we teach in our classes. We let them make a Christmas wreath, a centerpiece, or other project on our time. I often bring in homemade cookies and we make a party of it.

“Because we had been to Hawaii a few years ago and now have a pineapple forest in one of the greenhouses where we grow our own fresh pineapple, one year we had Maui Gold pineapple flown in for everyone for Christmas. We then let them plant their tops in the greenhouse and this summer they’ve been harvesting their own pineapple.

“In short, I try to mix things up so that they never know what to expect — and perhaps that’s the key to avoiding burnout. I have great fun thinking about new things with which to surprise them. This year for Mother’s Day, I had pink

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Wallace's Garden Center holiday party.

roses, some Danish and juice waiting for my ladies when they arrived, and a box full of tiaras. They could choose a tiara to wear for the wday and then keep. I was surprised that they stayed on so well — and those inexpensive headpieces from Amazon definitely changed the entire mood for the day. The ladies felt special and the customers loved the sparkling crowns that my gals had. It was a great way for us to show that we appreciated their time away from their families on Mother's Day."

Holiday Perks

Kate Terrell, manager of Wallace's Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa, says that, while her team tends to suffer from burnout in the spring much more than at the holidays, she does have some perks and treats for her team at holiday time.

"We usually have a nice holiday party — this year it was an Ugly Sweater Christmas Party with a taco bar and bowling and video games at an entertainment center. It was all staff and they were able to bring a +1. We had prizes for the ugly sweater contest as well.

"We do some potluck lunches, as well as provide lunch for everyone on certain busy days (Black Friday and Saturday)."

She says that on the first week of December, they give their employees a coupon for 50% off their entire purchase, so that they can holiday shop with their discount.

"Personally, I make sure to walk my dog for 30 to 40 minutes every night (even in frigid temps); this lets me clear my head and relax every day. I also will carve out time at home when I am so busy at work that my house gets ahead of me. I will go in an hour late for a couple days just to sleep in a little, do laundry, or clean.

"I also make time for my 10-year-old son — so we go camping or to the movies or swimming for an afternoon. Since COVID, we started closing most nights at 5 p.m. so the burnout doesn't get nearly as bad as it used to.

"Christmas is such a fun season for us and I try to remember that the really stressful part of the holiday is only about two weeks long and we can make it through pretty easily," she says.

Being Mindful of Time

Laura Landers, owner of GROW Geneva in Geneva, Illinois, wrote a blog post on her website last fall about beating holiday burnout.

"The holidays are upon us and it's the time of year for small shop owners everywhere to work long hours and carry extra stress as we make the push towards our busiest time of the year," she wrote.

"I LOVE the holidays at the shop. I love the hustle and bustle. I love the happy customers. I love transformation that happens within the shop. It's amazing but can take a toll on my mental state and physical health. It's easy to get overwhelmed and second guess everything. It's easy to put your health second by eating fast food and snacks all day.

"This year," she wrote, "I will be making a conscious effort to make a few changes." Those changes included: starting the season with a clean, beautiful and (mostly) organized house; eating properly; enjoy the little moments, like lighting a favorite candle and sitting in her plant room; and making an effort to not only decorate her house for Christmas, but to make sure she has time to enjoy it.

She shared with me two additional things she would add to that post now:



Rockledge Gardens started a new tradition to beat the day-after-Christmas blues.

“1. Delegate. If you are hiring properly, your team is more than capable of handling many tasks without you. Getting to this point as a shop owner was really hard for me but

I've learned to remind myself that it's OK if the task or display is done a little differently than I would have done it myself. I am a perfectionist when it comes to the visual appearance of my shop, and it's something I fuss with constantly so that has been a big learning experience for me. My manager also reminded me that even if the task is only completed to about 40% of my standards, I'm still 40% farther than I was before.

“2. Take time. After years of working seven days a week and before/after work, I have learned to carve out more time for myself. You can only go so long before the burnout starts to kick in and then you are hurting your business. I'm going to say that again. If you are burnt out, you are hurting your business. Small business owners have such a small margin of error when we are at our absolute best, so performing less than that is detrimental to your business. Taking time for myself makes me more focused while I am at work. It also makes me a happier and more pleasant person to be around. Taking weekends and occasional days off has been a game changer for me this spring and summer.”

Beating the Blues

Liz Lark-Riley, managing director of Rockledge Gardens started a new tradition to beat the day-after-Christmas blues.

“When I first started working in retail, it felt like such a bummer to go to work the day after Christmas ... but it doesn't have to be! Now we combat post-Christmas blues with games and gifts,” she says.

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She posted details of the scavenger hunt on her LinkedIn page (appropriately titled “Operation Day-After-Christmas Cheer”), where it quickly gained traction among other garden centers. Here’s how it works:

At the start of the day, there are 12 wrapped presents (one for each team member working that day), plus some bonus plants and a \$20 bill.

Prizes are given to the person who has made the highest sale for the day, as well as for each person who completes a certain task that day, such as the first to sell a birdbath, a 25- or 30-gallon tree, or a gift certificate.

The bonus plants are awarded to team members for signing up three customers to their Garden Bugs & Friends of the Farm loyalty program who weren't members before; the first to pass out five “Welcome” cards to guests who have never been here before; and to those who ask guests about their favorite gift this year — the weirdest gift reported (as determined by a manager) at the end of the day gets a bonus plant.

There's a hat that contains slips of paper with the names of everyone working that day. The first time someone completes a challenge, a name is pulled from the hat and that person gets to unwrap a gift. By the end of the day, everyone should have received one gift. When the names are all drawn, everyone writes down on a slip of paper someone they nominate for Rockledge Gardens MVP for the day. The MVP also gets to take home a bonus plant. 🌿

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