

# GARDEN CENT

From curb appeal to succession plans, garden center tours can provide owners, managers and staff motivation to improve, beneficial industry connections and long-lasting memories.

By Shanan Smith Molnar

**W**hile working with such great people to get ready for the 2011 Garden Centers of America (GCA) Summer Tour — which is next month in New Jersey — I found myself going through photos from past garden center tours and getting a little nostalgic in the process.

I've been GCA's VP of Operations since May 2005 and whether it was a summer tour or a holiday tour, I have been touched by the heart and passion of the owners, managers and staff at every independent garden center I've visited.

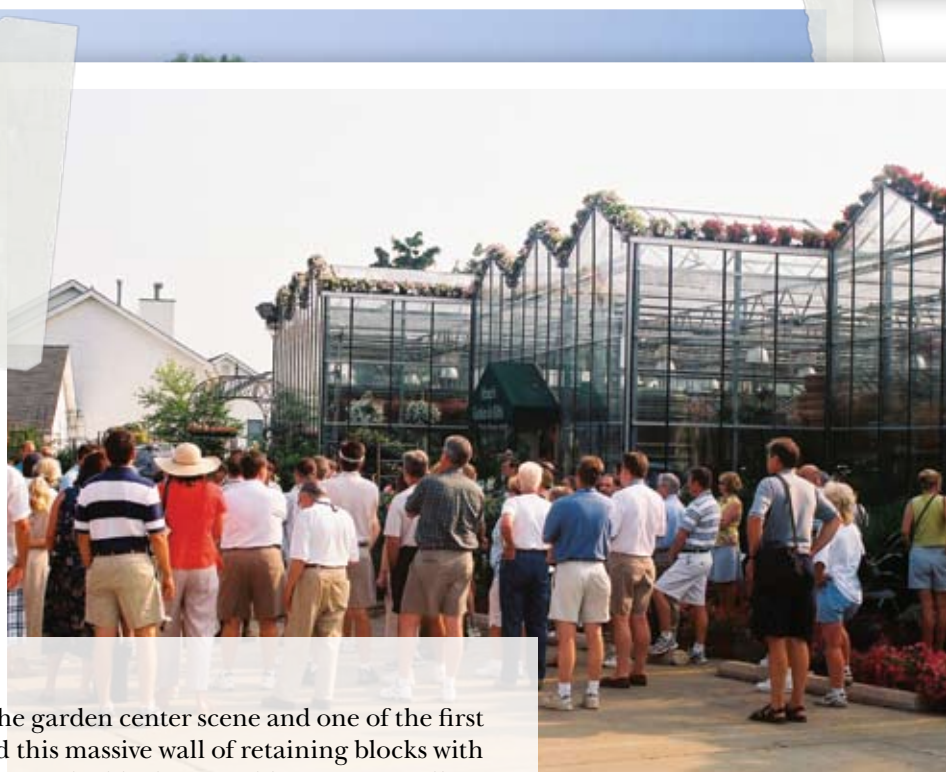
What follows are a few of my favorite tour experiences and great garden center ideas that continue to stand the test of time.



## CURB APPEAL

Imagine being new to the garden center scene and one of the first stops on your first tour had this massive wall of retaining blocks with petunias interspersed between the blocks. I was blown away! Pulling into the parking lot at Garden by Haefner's Greenhouse in 2005 on the St. Louis Summer Tour was amazing! This garden center was inviting its customers from the road while clearly telling them plant material is for sale.

Another location from the same tour — Ahner's Garden & Gifts — created a row of plants along their roof line that included irrigation and rope lighting.





# ER TOURING

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

Independent garden centers are frequently staffed by one family member after another. I once spoke to a family member of a good-sized store that once had 50 family members on the payroll at one time. Succession is a major issue in our industry. How to pass the store to the next generation, when to pass it, what gets passed specifically, who is or is not involved — all tremendous considerations with very hard answers.

This June, the Summer Tour in New Jersey will visit Williams Nursery, which is a fourth generation garden center. Attendees on this tour will have access to a vast amount of information from a retailer that has gone through

the succession process more than once.

Whether you work with your best friend, daughter, or even a dreaded brother-in-law, it makes the industry rather unique. The relationships are gifts at the end of the day.

On my first tour to St. Louis, it was incredibly heartwarming to see Sandi Hillermann McDonald as we pulled up to her store. Her staff was in the front of the store to greet us. Her father was a president of GCA and Sandi was our first second generation GCA president (and first female president). That evening, both generations came together to share the experience with every one of us in attendance — something that made quite an impression.

## MAKING AN EVENT OF IT

More and more garden centers are focusing considerable time as well as resources to planning events. Events give customers reasons to visit and can serve as a key element in communicating to consumers that the independent garden center is the expert. Everything from the spring flower show to a hanging basket building class can bolster your position as the go-to gardening source in your community. And remember, vendors are excellent resources for expertise in a particular area.

More and more, I hear about events that have existed in stores for years and have families coming back to the store for generations. Nothing says relationship building quite as well as repeat customers for generations!

Events can also strengthen your position as a community leader. Ken Long at L.A. Reynolds in Wiston-Salem, N.C. (2008 Summer Tour) offered his store for an Early Bird Breakfast for his local Chamber of Commerce. He found not only excellent demographics in potential customers that had not visited before, but also the local media ended up filming at the store for a last minute segment on the local news.



## HEAD TO THE GARDEN STATE

Staying abreast of new trends requires an active search for data. Garden center tours open up attendees to a world of new ideas and fresh perspectives.

This June, Garden Centers of America heads to New Jersey for three full days to check out some of the best independent garden centers on the East Coast. Don't miss the proverbial bus — get out and get inspired.

**What:** Garden Centers of America 2011 Summer Tour

**Where:** New Jersey

**When:** June 13th - 16th

Visit [www.GardenCentersofAmerica.org](http://www.GardenCentersofAmerica.org) for additional tour information and registration.

## COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION

Customers showing up on your property is not an accident. Whether you are using Facebook or e-blasts to communicate with your customers, timing and the way you deliver your message is becoming more and more critical. Even postcards and other mailed information needs to be fresh and hit at just the right time. Good newsletters may be somewhat subjective — it goes to the very core element of every item listed here — knowing your demographics!

Lately the e-newsletter from Hillermann Nursery & Florist in Washington, Mo. (2005 Summer Tour) has been written by a chicken that lives at the store. It is imaginative, fun and relevant to weather and blooms — yet engaging in a very light-hearted manner. And while this perspective may not work quite as well in some areas, it does lend itself to taking some intimidation out of garden centers.

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### Pookie's Scoop from the Coop

March 29, 2011

Hello Dear Readers,

Pookie here! What is with this crazy weather? The flock and I were snowed in on Saturday through Sunday Morning and sunbathing on Monday. Well, this is Missouri!

### We're Growing For You!

Along with the many changes we've made in the Garden Center for 2011, we've expanded our Hillermann Grown Plant Selections this year.





## SIZE DOESN'T ALWAYS MATTER

We have visited garden centers of all shapes and sizes. From Gerten's 100-acre property in St. Paul, Minn. (2007 Summer Tour and 2010 Holiday Tour) and the 42-acre Garden Factory in Rochester, N.Y. (2006 Summer Tour) to the small Garden Heights Nursery in St. Louis (2005 Summer Tour) and even the single city block of Tangletown in Minneapolis (2007 Summer Tour and 2010 Holiday Tour) — each location must make choices to utilize and maximize the space they have.

Since St. Louis was my first tour, I have always remembered Garden Heights for being a single acre yet selling \$3.1 million (in 2005). It's about using the space appropriately for your customers and your demographics. Make it inviting and even in the small spaces, inches can translate into dollars.

## WELL WORN SIGNAGE

Over the years, I have randomly polled tour attendees on the buses, asking if they do signage well. Many admit they need to improve. In the instances where it is done well, there is typically a person responsible and consistency is a key element.

While signage can be worn (Dickman's Farm, Auburn, N.Y., 2006 Summer Tour) or attached to a bench of annuals, it's important to remember one thing: make it easy and not intimidating. The Garden Corner in Portland (2009 Summer Tour) is one of my favorite signage locations, because its signs appeared as though the plants were speaking.

There are many options for signage now from plant tags to bench-type information. It's finding a program and style that works well in your store and that continues to share your store's message consistently with valid data presented in an accessible and understandable manner.

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING

In the summer of 2008, we visited the Raleigh, North Carolina area. One of the particularly interesting stories from that tour came from Logan's Trading Company. The previous summer, much of the Southeast experienced a significant drought. Logan's happened to sell rain barrels. The only other vendor in the area was the local water authority. The town was frequently out of rain barrels and didn't offer much variety. Logan's total sales for the year in the rain barrel department equaled \$100,000. They recognized the need, moved quickly and bought out their supplier.

Trends in this industry are constantly breaking. Independent garden centers certainly have the ability to react more quickly than most chains. Another example of that comes from K&W Greenery in Janesville, Wis. (2006 Holiday Tour). Painted poinsettias were definitely a hot trend in 2006, and K&W's individually painted poinsettia masterpieces were a popular holiday item. 🌿



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