

An Off-Season Turned On

By Pete Mihalek

You and Planterra Conservatory have two big things in common — greenhouse space and an off-season. This simple observation is a great jumping-off point when considering post-season event ideas. After all, you have space that's beautiful. Maybe it's time to let others take advantage of it.

Thirty minutes from downtown Detroit, Planterra Conservatory contains Planterra's collection of unique botanicals and is open year-round to the public for retail sales. Additionally, Planterra Conservatory is home to the company's core interior landscape business, along with 11,000 square feet of rentable conservatory space — the catalyst of a fully developed in-house wedding and events division.

Shane Pliska, president of Planterra, talks to *Lawn & Garden Retailer* about turning green space into event space and what it takes to become the "best venue for a winter wedding in Michigan."

When did you realize Planterra could profit from hosting events?

Pliska: We discovered quickly that we weren't really making any money just by renting the space with our room rental fee, because of the labor involved — especially with weddings.

But we continued to have a huge volume of inquiries for people to rent out the space, which included people who were trying to bring in their own caterers and that was always a real headache.

So, when food and beverage projections reached \$1 million, we made a decision to contract the catering with one exclusive caterer and obtained a liquor license. So now,

we sell wedding and event packages as a complete offering.

You do have to think of it as a different business and you're not going to make money on it unless you are able to get a nice volume of bookings and professionalize it. If you're not able to do that than it becomes a distraction and then it's really not worth it.

With the Conservatory open year-round to the public, are you forced to rearrange displays and the layout with each event you host?

Pliska: Depending on the event type, we have an established layout so we understand how to accommodate certain numbers of people. Sticking with a set number of layouts has gotten our staff familiar with the layouts. We've also changed our retail displays to be more event-friendly, too.

So we're starting to work smarter, not harder. In the beginning we were moving absolutely everything. Now we know exactly where things go.

What is it about your conservatory space that proves hospitable for events?

Pliska: It's nothing new that people are attracted to and just like being in a nature-like setting. Very few people envision their dream wedding to be inside a banquet hall with four walls and a ceiling and bad carpeting.

We can provide that "botanical garden" kind of feel to it. It feels natural and it feels elegant. We're able to offer an outdoor wedding venue

On The Road

Shane will be on the "Destination Garden Center — The Food Element" panel on July 16 at OFA Short Course, Columbus, Ohio (www.ofashortcourse.org). Additionally, the Planterra Conservatory will be a stop on this summer's GCA Tour in Detroit, June 25-28 (www.gardencentersofamerica.org).

indoors, which makes our venue even more appealing. No rain-risk.

Our season is the opposite of the golf club season — September through May — so we have a lot less competition.

Also, we have a very high ceiling in our conservatory area. We have attractive finishes and an attractive floor. So when people come to our space, for a wedding, they walk into a place that feels like a botanical garden, not a space that feels like a garden center that does weddings.

That means first impressions matter a lot. So when guests walk in, they're greeted by our stone archways and our fountain, and not a single cash wrap in sight. Nobody's walking into a bank of cash registers or your fertilizer department. A reasonable goal in hosting non-gardening related events is to create a space that feels like a hospitality setting. **LGR**

