

# Open to Change

Smith's Acres, the garden center chosen as *Lawn & Garden Retailer's* Merchandiser of the Year, prides itself on a great staff, beautiful container displays and, above all, a willingness to experiment with new ideas.

By Paige Worthy



Vibrant color, constant change and creative merchandise couplings helped Smith's Acres rise to the top. Center: Three of the Veggie Girls enjoy a brief "siesta" on Adirondack chairs in the greenhouse. (Photos: Smith's Acres)

Last year, *Lawn & Garden Retailer* wanted to create a competition that would recognize the top merchandiser in our industry, a garden center that exemplifies the creativity and passion that's keeping business alive in the face of today's housing hardships and general economic slump. We left the final decision to our readers and customers who heard about the competition and wanted to support their hometown garden center. When the last vote was counted, one garden center had really risen to the top: Smith's Acres in Niantic, Conn., was the clear winner. Read on for a little background on the business, advice from the owners and a glimpse into the inspiration that earned them the title of our 2007 Merchandiser of the Year.

## Steps to Success

In 1980, Joseph Smith and his wife, Teri, opened a summer farm stand in Ledyard, Conn. Joe had a degree in horticulture and started his career as a wholesale grower, so in addition to the fruits and vegetables at the stand, they also sold bedding plants and hanging baskets left over from the spring season.

Thanks to its great location and the couple's business savvy, the stand was a huge hit in the community, and the couple soon expanded their product line to include perennials, shrubs, containers and gifts. Smith's Acres was officially in business.

The couple hired a few young, "bright, talented and energetic" people to staff their sales force, and as Smith's Acres grew in popularity, they became known as the "Veggie Girls."

"I'll come back from one of our trips and be all energized, and we just start moving displays," Teri says. "My staff is very creative, so once one of us comes up with an idea for a display, everyone seems to add to it. Very seldom is one display the creation of just one of us."

## Every Day's a Holiday

The displays change often, Teri says. "Probably too often!" Even if it's just one major element that remains a focal point in the store, "very few of our displays are stagnant; we try to do something different at least once a week." But customers respond to every shift, scouting the store for little changes and new items to try out. "It always surprises us when we re-merchandise some product that's been hanging around for a while — suddenly, it's flying off the shelves," she says.



“I think we need to compete more with the golf courses, the movie theaters and, in our area, the boating industry. That’s our competition.” — Teri Smith



Hundreds of containers, from basic terra cotta to a dizzying rainbow of colors and glazes, occupy every nook and cranny of Smith’s Acres. Filled with plant material, gazing balls and tucked among other products, they’re one of the keys to the center’s merchandising.

Customers love the ever-changing displays. “We do a lot of color blocking at the garden center,” Teri says. “It makes quite a statement and brings in a lot of shoppers.” Every display begins with natural plant material, she says, because plants are where their expertise really lies. “Everything else is add-ons,” she says. Smith’s Acres, despite the vastness of its name, actually sits on less than one acre of land, so merchandise is “jammed” into nooks and crannies everywhere. Even in the awkward corners, containers are artfully arranged with shrubs, annuals or perennials to illustrate how customers might use them at home.

Major holidays throughout the year are an especially festive time for customers to see the creative juices flowing at Smith’s Acres. Easter is the store’s big spring kickoff, Teri says, complete with a visit from the Easter Bunny. Mother’s Day is all pink. Summer’s patriotic trifecta of Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day brings red, white and blue to center stage. Halloween’s another busy time, with plenty of pumpkins, mums and asters adding to the vibrant fall color palette. Every fall, the businesses in town compete in a scarecrow contest, and Smith’s Acres once took the prize for a life-size scarecrow made entirely of terra-cotta pots. At Christmas, a “forest” of themed artificial trees were stocked with ornaments and helped keep sales up. “I can’t keep the girls down; they do it all year long,” Teri says.

### The Real Competition

Teri and Joe work hard to stay on top of their game and provide the best merchandise, plants and service to their customers. In the history of their business, they’ve traveled to gift shows throughout the United States and researched the newest plants and flowers by attending events such as OFA’s Short Course, the Tropical Plant Industry Exposition (TPIE), New England Grows! and the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show (MANTS).

Between maintaining their store’s operations, constant research and education on the changing retail and horticultural markets, Teri also keeps tabs on sales and special events going on at the Lowe’s, Home Depot and four other independent garden centers within a 10-mile radius of the store. While so many other businesses in such a small area

might feel daunting for other garden center owners, Teri prefers not to think of them as competition for Smith’s Acres.

“Anytime someone buys a plant from a big box, independent garden center or garden club plant sale, they’re helping to grow the gardening population in our area,” she says. “Once you get customers hooked on gardening, they’re going to start looking for the new, the unusual and the really exciting. Then we’ve got them. I think we need to compete more with the golf courses, the movie theaters and, in our area, the boating industry. That’s our competition.”

### Setting an Example

Teri Smith attributes the store’s success — both in business and in *Lawn & Garden Retailer’s* competition — to the Veggie Girls’ enthusiasm, a loyal customer base and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and new ideas. “None of us have any kind of background in merchandising, but we have a different, fresh approach,” she says. And when customers got wind that their favorite garden center was in the running for the title of Merchandiser of the Year, they logged on in overwhelming numbers to show their support.

Finally, Joe and Teri’s passion for educating themselves on the market ensures that they’ll always be on top of the retail game, and Teri suggests other garden center owners do the same. “I adamantly encourage people to get out there and learn,” Teri says. Don’t be afraid to experiment, even if you’re copying someone else’s technique: It won’t look the same in your store, for better or worse. Visit other businesses, even those outside the lawn and garden industry, to get ideas and see what else is out there. Talk with fellow garden center owners, whether you consider them competition or colleagues. “New ideas don’t happen if you spend your entire life behind a desk or with your hand stuck to a garden hose.”

*Paige Worthy is managing editor of Lawn & Garden Retailer. She can be reached at (847) 391-1050 or [pworthy@sgcmail.com](mailto:pworthy@sgcmail.com).*

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