

Summer Events from Coast to Coast



With so much sun and fun to capture customers' attention during the summer, retailers must work extra hard to drive them into their stores. Find out how these garden centers from Oregon to New York have made their summer events a success.

By Katie Hagen

Ah, those three wonderful months of June, July and August. As temperatures hit triple digits and customers are vacationing, garden retailers may see their sales wilting faster than impatiens in direct sun. So how can you draw people into your garden center amid all of summer's distractions? *Lawn & Garden Retailer* found out how several garden retailers across the country use the season's best attributes to plan summer events and promotions that are worth the trip.

Roll Out the Red Carpet

There's nothing like a little local celebrity to lend some sparkle to an event. Located in East Norwich, N.Y., Martin Viette Nurseries plans to kick off the summer with a seminar given by orig-



Rich Abate, nursery supervisor at Martin Viette Nurseries, is a certified nursery/landscape professional. Here he demonstrates proper pruning techniques using in-store merchandise to illustrate the use of hedge trimmers.

inal co-owner Andre Viette. Education coordinator Donna Moramarco says the lecture, scheduled for the first weekend in June, will be a big draw for the garden center's clientele.

The nursery plans to put up a large tent in its perennial garden area, where Viette's seminar will focus on the best perennials for Long Island gardens.

"He'll be surrounded by the plants he's worked with and even hybridized," Moramarco says. "And he'll be speaking about the plants we know are tried and true to Long Island."

In addition to the hour-long seminar, Viette will broadcast his weekly call-in radio program, *In the Garden*, from the nursery. He'll also be available to sign his book.

"People will enjoy chatting with him informally," Moramarco says. "He's such a phenomenal draw that people will want to hear him. It's going to be gangbusters event."

The nursery anticipates a turnout of 300 to 400.

Themed Trials Gardens

Al's Garden Center in Woodburn, Ore., uses a half-acre of its own rolling landscape to lure customers in August. For one month, Al's creates themed trial gardens to plant varieties of the next year's annuals. Last year's trial gardens evoked the Hawaiian islands, complete with a Tiki hut and waterfall.

This is Al's 60th anniversary year, says marketing director Lora Keddie, so the gardens will tell the story of how Al's came to be. What began as an abandoned chicken coop became a roadside fruit stand, which has now blossomed into a three-store garden center chain. Large historic photos throughout the center will honor Al's entrepreneurial legacy.

Keddie says the biggest barrier to fall gardening is a lack of time. "Yet they all come out to the trial gardens," she says. The trial gardens are so successful that even local nonprofits use the space for their fundraiser events, Keddie says.

Direct marketing has been the best way to reach Al's 40,000 members. "We build loyalty programs instead of just putting an ad on TV," she says. During the summer, Keddie says, "you can throw marketing money at the wind, but customers are all on vacation," she says.

That's why Al's also has a rewards program. Starting in January, customers earn one Al's Buck for every \$10 spent. In July, they can redeem their Al's Bucks for up to 50 percent off perennials.

In addition, Al's holds a crape myrtle festival in August. "It reinspires us in late summer," Keddie says.

Three-Ring Circus

Minneapolis-St. Paul-based Bachman's Inc. rolls its customer appreciation, ice cream social and garden party into one event. Taking place over one weekend in June, the triple-threat event attracts tens of thousands of customers to Bachman's seven Twin Cities locations.

Through a partnership with the Schwan Food Company, the garden center gave away Schwan's signature ice cream and coupons last year. Customers could play Blongo Ball and Chuck-O — two lawn games sold at Bachman's — or attend one of several seminars indoors. Last year, one lecture focused on using perennials to keep color all season long, not just in the spring and fall. Bachman's also offered lemonade, sidewalk chalk and face painting for kids.

At the chain's flagship store, a van promoting VitaminWater was stationed outside. Customers could spin a game wheel to win a free bottle of the water. Bachman's also held topiary-making demonstrations and gave away food samples made on Weber grills sold in the stores.

Marketing director Larry Pfarr says Bachman's aim is to do something fun and different. He added that the store's employees loved last year's event. "It's definitely a return on the investment," Pfarr says. "That's why we're repeating it this year."

Bachman's also held drawings for door prizes in effort to grow its customer database. "Most importantly we're looking for e-mail addresses," he says.

Something for Everyone

Located in the Chicago suburb of Wilmette, Ill., Chalet Nursery offers a little bit of everything at its three-day blowout over Arbor Day weekend. The late April event, called Garden Faire, aims to appeal to everyone, from Gen X to on-the-go gardeners.

Heading into its third year, the event attracts 2,000 to 3,000 people and is sponsored by two of Chicago's light jazz and soft rock radio stations. Communication director Maggie Zielinski says it's a mutually beneficial marketing partnership.

At the heart of Garden Faire are special discounts, a marketing strategy Chalet rarely uses. Each day, members of the rewards program Chalet Valet, which anyone can join, receive a 20 percent discount on select products. For example, Saturday's discount includes Felco products, silk stems, cactus, succulents and roses.

The event's second pillar is a daily lecture. Zielinski says Chalet will host three regional and local garden celebrities. Roy Diblik of Northwinds Perennial Farm, known for his work on the gardens at Chicago's Millennium Park, will speak about native plants in a lecture called "Know Maintenance." Guests will come away with a how-to "recipe card" after his lecture.

"Younger gardeners think this is hard," Zielinski says. "The recipe card makes it sound easier."

Chalet also organizes a slew of other interactive demonstrations. In the Landscape Challenge, two landscapers face off in a timed, *Iron Chef*-style contest. Audience members vote for the landscaper who creates the best design with potted plants and materials in front of a residential backdrop.

Above: Last year, Chalet Nursery celebrated its 90th year in business by offering free mini cupcakes at Garden Faire 2007. **Top:** Children enjoyed face painting and the plant-a-pot activity at Chalet Nursery's Garden Faire 2007.

"It's immediate gratification for the guest," says John Hoerst, buyer and merchandising manager. Incorporating Chalet's landscape division makes Garden Faire a total company function, he says, and helps drum up new landscape customers.

Podcaster Eric Rochow, iTunes' top-ranked gardening podcaster, will film several events during the weekend and post them on his website, www.GardenFork.tv.

"We're experimenting," Zielinski says. "This will help us draw in those Gen Xers who are interested but don't know how to garden."

Other hands-on events include Build a Garden, where customers can create their own container garden. By surrounding an oriental lily with other annuals, the container will bridge the seasons. In Succulent Success, customers have several options to create a unique succulent dish garden. They can watch a designer build it on site, pick up a "Do It Yourself" kit or buy a grab-and-go garden. Other how-to sessions will cover flower and stem design and fountain setup. "The product sells itself when we have live demos," Zielinski says.

Beyond the to numerous idea gardens, the weekend also offers soil testing, garden-tool conditioning and pet food-sampling booths. An organic planting expert will be on site, and customers interested in sustainability can purchase a Farm in a Basket, which comes pre-seeded with vegetables and herbs.

"We're turning our sales area into a garden showcase," Hoerst says. "Customers can gather ideas and inspirations, or actually uproot what they like and take it with them."

During 2007's Garden Faire, average sales were up 111 percent compared to the previous year, Zielinski says. She says the return in sales, repeat visits and customer buzz was so strong, Chalet decided to repeat the event this year. "Sales continue throughout the year," she says. "It's not just a three-day event."

According to Hoerst, customers frequently return later to buy an item that was mentioned at the fair, or take a picture of an idea garden so they can recreate it. "We're giving them training for their dollars," Hoerst adds. "They look at us as the experts." ▶



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PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

He says the deals on items like 10- to 12-inch hanging baskets were key in bringing in customers who, by summer, are largely done with their spring gardening. Customers told him, "Wow, I thought I was done, but I could use a basket or two, or some containers."

If You Grill It, They Will Come

L.A. Reynolds Garden Showcase in Winston-Salem, N.C., gets the party started early with a family event during the first weekend in April. Headlining Reynolds' Spring Open House and Garden Party are 2,000 Nathan's Famous hot dogs, best known from the hot dog-eating contest held at Coney Island. Reynolds' president, Ken Long, says his staff grills the hot dogs on site and hands them out to customers for free. Long says last spring's event was a huge success with moms, dads and kids alike.

"People absolutely loved [the hot dogs]," he adds. "They told us these are the best they've ever had."

No carnival would be complete without the trimmings. Reynolds staff members also hand out lemonade, popcorn and helium balloons.

In addition to the festival, Reynolds has industry representatives on hand to answer questions about their products. Last year, a rose expert was available and a semilocal company gave out free samples of earthworm castings. "We've found people would just rather talk one-on-one," Long says.

Last year's event drew 3,000 people and provided a 50 percent lift in sales, compared to the surrounding weekends. For a moderate expenditure of \$2,500, Long says the sales made it worthwhile.

"It was our busiest parking lot day and our busiest sales day," he says. "Sometimes you might have a full parking lot, but no sales. We got the sales right then. The food really brings people out."

Strictly Business

While carnivals and lectures might work for some retailers, another camp prefers to skip the frills and stick to the basics.

Like most of the country, the brutal Mid-Atlantic summer heat can be lethal for the gardening industry. That's why 20 years ago, Homestead Gardens' owner sought a way to keep business booming in July and August. Today, the Davidsonville, Md., garden center still holds its Crape Myrtle Festival each July.

From April through June, customers earn Myrtle Money — one Myrtle dollar for every \$10 purchase. They can then use their Myrtle Money during the Crape Myrtle Festival in mid-July, scheduled to coincide with the first bloom of its namesake.

Marketing director Tim Hamilton says the festival used to be a family event, but Homestead has since gotten rid of the gimmicks and games. Aside from a live band each day of the weekend-long festival, a Homestead tradition, Hamilton says the center keeps it to business. "We have so many hardcore customers who just want to shop," he says.

Two weeks before the festival, Hamilton says the store sees increased traffic with people scoping out the inventory, but not the corresponding sales. The first day Myrtle Money can be redeemed brings a Black Friday crowd, with customers arriving three hours before the doors open.

A Little Less Conversation

Woodley's Garden Center in Columbia, S.C., nixed its spring seminars to focus on its customers during their busiest season. General manager Robin Klein says Woodley's found that while traffic is up on seminar weekends, sales are down.

"People who want to shop don't come because of all the other people there for the seminar," Klein explains. Woodley's answer to increasing both traffic and sales is its Blooming Bucks program. Customers earn Blooming Bucks for every purchase in the spring and can redeem them in mid-July.

"It's our main attraction as far as getting the cash registers rolling," she says.

To maintain its momentum from July into August, Woodley's second-worst month for sales, the garden center will be holding its first Garden Photo Contest this year. "We're trying to drive traffic with people dropping off their photos," Klein says.

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