



# CHILD'S PLAY

By Darhiana Mateo

Transforming your garden center into a dynamic destination for children — the potential next generation of gardeners — can be a sound investment in your future.

**A**nn Moorhead has been an enthusiastic regular at Al's Garden Center's Sherwood, Ore., location for more than half her life.

Ann, 7, and her mother, Liz, have been attending the garden center's Kids Club programs — where Ann has gleefully gotten her hands dirty planting bulbs and vegetable seeds, building garden stepping stones and even learning flower pressing basics — “pretty much every month” for the past four years, says Liz Moorhead.

“It's a beautiful place,” she says. “[My daughter] loves the colors and textures and beauty.”

## Generating Excitement

As garden centers, concerned about a declining interest in gardening, pump up their efforts to draw the coveted X and Y generations through their doors, some businesses — like the Oregon-based franchise Al's Garden Center — are showing foresight and tapping into an even younger demographic: children. “They're the future of gardening and definitely worth investing in,” says Amy Bigej, director of Al's Kids Club. “It's getting them interested now, so when they're 30 or 40, they continue to be interested.”

What began as a single “Kids'

Bulb Day” class 12 years ago, in which Al's Garden Center opened its doors to kids of all ages and taught them to plant their own bulbs in pots, has evolved into a dynamic and bustling “Kids Club,” offering monthly educational workshops on everything from creating your own birdhouse to learning about bug-eating plants and making a worm farm. Al's offers the classes at all three store locations (Sherwood, Gresham and Woodburn), which draw a group of 40 to 100 kids a month ranging in age from 5 to 7.

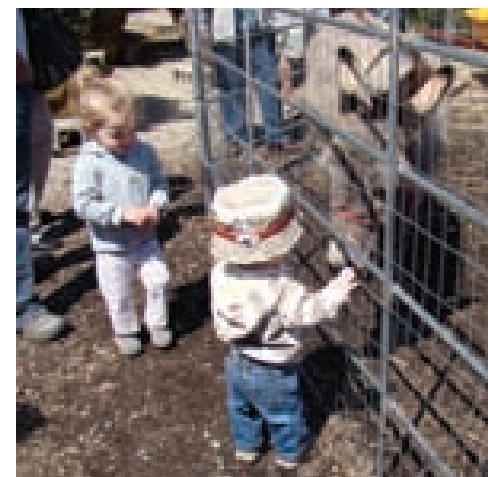
“The greatest thing is just watching the excitement on their faces, their love of digging in the dirt and grabbing worms or getting their

Venus flytraps. That excitement and anticipation: watching, waiting for seeds to sprout,” Bigej says.

And that excitement goes both ways, as garden centers are equally energized by their little visitors — and their appreciative parents. “Five years ago, gardening was going downhill. Everyone was worried about young people not gardening anymore,” Bigej says. “We felt like if we start young, do something the family can enjoy together, we can put value in that and get young parents involved early on.” In fact, Al's Garden Center typically sees sales numbers jump up on program days. “It helps promote sales when we're slower just



**Left:** At Al's Garden Center, kids aren't the only ones learning — parents share in the fun, too! (Photo: Al's Garden Center) **Right:** A petting zoo is a surefire way to lure kids. (Photo: Churchill's Gardens)



by having that foot traffic with the parents there,” she adds.

### Cultivating a Connection

Bruce Butterfield, research director for the National Gardening Association (NGA), a zealous advocate of the benefits of engaging kids in gardening, says research shows that “most people who are interested in gardening today, whether they’re casual gardeners or gardening enthusiasts, got exposed at home.” In other words, when kids are introduced to gardening at an early age, they are more likely to continue that hobby.

These days, “we’re not seeing that transfer happening” as much, Butterfield says. Enter garden centers. While it may be difficult to compete with “something that comes with a keyboard or mouse or that you can text,” there’s plenty of evidence that a garden can be a very engaging environment for children to learn and grow. And if kids aren’t learning it at home, garden centers can play a crucial role in filling that void. ♦

## Kids’ Gardening 101: Tips for Success

**Nature as Teaching Tool:** By making your programs entertaining and educational, you can help children explore and learn in a fun setting. Parents are more likely to bring their children if they feel there’s some educational component.

**Frugal and Fabulous:** Who says a program has to be expensive and elaborate to be a hit? Don’t get intimidated and think children’s programs are outside your budget. Simple, inexpensive programs, like leading a nature walk and having kids collect different leaves, can be just as fun as a more elaborate event.

**Instant Gratification:** At Al’s Garden Center, their youngest kids club member is 3 years old. Depending on the age of the children, try to choose projects



A garden center transforms into a magical playground for fairy wannabes. (Photo: Churchill’s Gardens)

that allow kids to be successful and boost their self esteem.

**The Take-Home:** Al’s Garden Center’s programs always includes a “take-home” project to keep kids engaged after they leave the garden center.

**Say it Loud, Say it Proud:** Promote your children’s activities in as many ways as you can. Coming up with a fun name (like Churchill’s Green Thumbs Club) and logo can help others remember your garden center and generate more buzz about your activities.

**Consistency Is Key:** Maintaining a consistent schedule (such as offering a class on the third Saturday morning of each month) and making sure your calendar is up to date can make it easier for parents to plan to attend your programs.

**Parents Welcome:** Inviting parents to participate in Kids Club activities has proven successful for Al’s Garden Center, says Bigej. “Not only [are we] educating the kids, but in a non-threatening way, we’re also educating the parents.”



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## PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

"It is cultivating the next generation of gardeners and garden consumers," says Barbara Richardson, NGA grants coordinator and editor of the group's website, [www.kidsgardening.org](http://www.kidsgardening.org), a deep well of resources on the topic. "It makes that full connection: connecting kids with nature, connecting them with the garden center, building that lifelong love of learning in the outdoors."

### Creating an Experience

A whimsical "fairy event" that unleashed kids' imagination as they constructed makeshift fairy houses and dressed up like their favorite fairies, a chick-hatching seminar and a petting zoo, are just some of the reasons Exeter, N.H.-based Churchill's Gardens is fast becoming a destination for kids.

"We're already a place where moms want to come; we want it to be a place where their kids want to come, too," says Community Outreach Director Lisa Aquizap, who heads the children's programs. "They're such a video game/electronic generation. I was concerned that we would potentially lose a whole generation of kids."

Luckily, Churchill's is more than willing to put up a good fight. The staff is committed to creating an environment that appeals to adults and children alike. "We want to



Children who are exposed to gardening at a young age are likely to continue the hobby as adults.

be an experience," she says. "The moms love the aesthetics, but the children love the experience."

The garden center's thriving Green Thumbs Club has been hosting nature-themed programs for children year round for the past four years. During their busy selling season, the programs are usually held monthly, but when things slow down at retail, they offer biweekly events. The free events attract anywhere between 25 and 100 kids. "We made a commitment to invest in that generation, to invest in what would be the future Churchill's customers."

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## PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES



A little creativity is all that's needed to turn a garden center into a destination for kids.

### Building Loyalty

Investing in the “future” and engaging children in gardening during their formative years is not a quick money-making strategy. In fact, Churchill’s “doesn’t charge a thing” for its popular Green Thumb Club activities. The garden center relies on creativity and resourcefulness to put on programs that don’t dent its budget, like a simple scarecrow-making workshop in which parents brought old clothes and the garden center provided the straw. It’s never been about the money, says Aquizap: “We become part of their children’s memories. We’re part of

their family history. You can’t buy that kind of advertising.”

That said, garden centers know that when you invest in kids, parents often return the favor. “A lot of times we’re taking care of the kids while the parents are out shopping,” she says. “When you invest in children, the parents feel like they can invest in you. It’s just building loyalty.”

Al’s Garden Center regular Liz Moorhead agrees: “From a business perspective, I’d rather go to Al’s Garden Center and buy a plant even if it costs a little more than going to Home Depot or Lowe’s,” she says. “When you step inside, it’s the environment, how you feel; it’s the people wearing the purple shirts and helping you when you need it... It’s the sense of family.”

Although Al’s Garden Center charges a modest \$5 fee for their classes “just to break even,” they want the parents to really see the value in their programs, Bigej says. That’s why they’re constantly mixing things up and introducing new and exciting classes. “It has to be something that draws their attention.”

### Spreading the Word

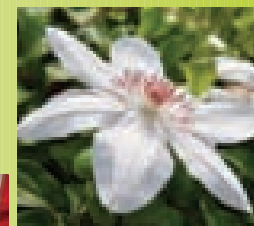
If you’re contemplating organizing your first kids’ program, remember that a significant factor in your success will boil down to one thing: promotion. Savvy, well-executed and attention-grabbing

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## PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES



**Left:** Mom and daughter get close to nature. (Photo: Churchill's Gardens) **Right:** A gardening enthusiast in the making?

publicity efforts will help you draw people to your doors (then it's time to really wow them). Churchill's gets the word out through various media: They create a children's event calendar, which they mail out to new homeowners, and upload to their company website; they tap into their network of moms by passing out flyers at different children's organizations, and they take advantage of their prime location across the street from a day care center.

Al's Garden Center also lists programs on its website, allowing people to sign up online or in the store, hands out flyers at local elementary schools and displays brochures prominently in all of its retail locations. But the most effective marketing tool has simply been word of mouth, Bigej says.

### Effective Merchandising

Now that you have throngs of eager children visiting your garden center, it's only natural that you also provide kid-friendly merchandise they can take home with them. Churchill's Gardens designates a specific place in the garden center for kids' merchandise, and thoughtfully tailors their merchandising approach so that it's most effective. The "Children's Corner" at Churchill's is stocked with kids' hats, gardening tools and bug collectors, among other merchandise, and placed "lower" so they are within easy reach of children. Their brightly colored signs convey simple words in easy-to-read bold or print letters — perfect for their audience.

Al's Garden Center, which carries kids' seeds, Crocs and some garden tools, also tries to tie in promotional sales to their children's events. "If we're doing something on Northwest birds, we would try to have items out around the kids' area to market to parents, like birdhouses," Bigej says. "We're always trying to

find new ways to market products along with related kids' programs."

### Planting Seeds

Igniting a child's endless curiosity and introducing to them the joys of gardening can be the beginning of a long-lasting relationship. Garden centers that dedicate key staff, resources and time to engaging the next generation are helping revolutionize the image of a garden center from a "baby boomer" hot spot into a destination for children. And in the process, they're gaining the loyalty of their parents and, hopefully, cultivating future customers. As Lisa Aquizap puts it, it's truly a win-win scenario: "As a garden center, you can't lose having these programs," she says. "We wouldn't be doing this program if we weren't planning on being here for a long time. We take valuable real estate for our petting zoo area and fish pond for their children. [Parents] know that means something."

It's no longer just about luring the 20-something new homeowner or the urban dweller seeking to spruce up a patio to your garden center; many garden centers are taking a long-term approach and recognizing the value of investing in the next generation of gardeners. As NGA's Barbara Richardson puts it: "Most people who garden as children come back to it eventually." 🌱

**Darhiana Mateo** is associate editor of *Lawn & Garden Retailer*. She can be reached at (847) 391-1013 or [dmateo@sgcmail.com](mailto:dmateo@sgcmail.com).

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