



It's All Fun And Games

A children's department in your garden center can create a family atmosphere and introduce younger generations to gardening — in addition to tapping into this robust market segment.

By Meghan Boyer

You already know that any time you can bring people into your store it means more money, but have you thought about using more than plants and fertilizer as bait? Many garden centers now carry home décor and gift items as a regular part of their offering. What about other items? What about products that are not usually considered garden products...things like pet supplies and gourmet food? These kinds of ancillary categories are proving profitable for garden centers around the country.

"Developing Markets," a monthly series that will appear in each issue of Lawn & Garden Retailer, will profile eight of these potential new markets, giving insight into the health of the market, relating how other garden centers have mastered the category and profiling some of the best new products in the category.

January: Fashion Accessories
February: Cause Merchandise
March: Candles
April: Children's Department
June: Apparel
July: Art
August: Books
November: Home Accessories

Children may be small, but they can be quite powerful — especially in the retail sector. The heft of their allowances and the

pressure to purchase they exert on parents and caregivers makes the children's market a lucrative business for retailers. In 2005, *Women's Wear Daily* reported that kids spend approximately \$260 million

a year. Of that, \$10-11 million comes from their allowance and gift money.

Carrying products geared toward children not only can bring a chunk of that total into your garden center but can please families who shop with children. This also creates an opportunity — if you carry child-sized gardening sets and toys — for younger generations to fall in love with gardening, thus creating life-long customers.

The youth market is broad; clothes, books, gadgets and toys are all encompassed within it, and each category is a moneymaker itself. Toys alone bring in billions of dollars each year. Earlier this year, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the toy industry sold \$21.3 billion worth of toys in 2005.

Though this is an impressive figure, it's important to consider that kids have more toys today than previous generations and there are lots of toys out there for sale, which is why creating a niche for your store by carrying products with a specific theme such as garden and nature may work well. Obviously, garden products fit well in garden centers — kids get to have the same sorts of tools and containers as their parents but in their own size and style — but there are other themes you can explore as well. In addition to kids' gardening products, you can incorporate science-, travel- or nature-related toys, stuffed animals



Colorful clothing as well as toys can be added to a children's department.



Make displays bright, interesting and child accessible.

and arts and crafts — anything children will enjoy that is also different from what is found in traditional toy stores.

Keep Kids Interested

Despite what parents would like, their kids often are the real decision makers in the household. Bedtimes, errands and mealtimes are arranged around children's needs and moods, which often mean parents' wants are moved aside. Having a children's department in your store can help create a kid-friendly atmosphere that appeals to the whole family. Women, your main customer base, will appreciate this. They are most likely to keep shopping at stores that reach out to kids and understand the challenges of shopping with children.

Appealing Displays. Of equal importance to the type of children's products you choose is how they are displayed. Tucking kids' toys and tools in a dark corner won't help them sell. Focus on the visual: Bright, colorful displays in prominent areas are what attract kids. The goal is to keep them interested in the display and products, thereby

freeing mom to shop longer. Prominent placement in the store also will help fuel impulse purchases.

Be Interactive. In addition to visually appealing displays, consider adding interactive elements. These elements can be as simple as setting up a small table and chairs with colors and coloring books, a la most waiting rooms, or you can use the hands-on aspect for product trials. Open a few products and set them out so kids and their parents can play with them.

Long-term games such as puzzles are not the best choice because children may be disappointed if they have to leave prior to finishing a game. Since parents consider aspects like safety, education, price and durability when buying toys, putting products out for them to try with their children can help convince them of a product's worth, a crucial step in leading to its purchase.

Be Careful. Though it has many benefits, be aware that an interactive children's area will need to be watched closely, and employees will need to keep it neat and sanitized. Small items may accidentally leave with children, and some kids might become upset if they have to leave the toys at the store. Crayons and markers increase the risk of marks on merchandise, walls and floors.

Create Events. You can take the interactive idea farther by incorporating children-centric events and workshops in your garden center. Invite moms to bring their kids in to paint pots together or to go on garden center tours. Such activities can bring more families into your garden center and drive impulse purchases.

Involving Employees

Put outgoing, kid-loving employees in charge of the children's department. Encourage them to interact with the kids, especially if there is a hands-on area for playing. Of course, make it clear that the employees are not babysitters — ♦

Stephen Hicks of Hicks Nurseries, Westbury, N.Y., knows the importance of catering to families and children with in-store activities and products. Read on to find out about the children's department in his store.

How long have you been stocking children's merchandise?

I guess that depends on how you categorize children's merchandise. I know that children's activities and catering to families with children has been a key part of who we are for the last 30 years.

What made you decide to add children's merchandise?

We've always tried to have some appeal to children and families with children as sort of a core group.

How much space do you devote to products for children?

We have an area dedicated to children's merchandise twelve months a year. It is probably 300-400 sq.ft. that is devoted to children's merchandise.

What kind of children's merchandise do you sell?

We sell a lot of children's activities and toys. We even sell some plush, but one of the angles we've had to take on it is having a science or almost a Discovery Channel feel to the merchandise we sell. For example, we'll sell bug catchers and dinosaur making kits.

What is your philosophy in choosing the products?

I think the approach we've tried to take is that they be earth-, outdoor-related products where it's not just a Toys "R" Us. It doesn't make sense to try to become a toy store.

What products sell best?

We sell a fair amount of plush (stuff animals). Right now there are some Easter products in there. Also, some wind up toys and there's a birdhouse-making kit.

What kind of margin does the children's area produce?

The margin is the same as all of the other merchandise in the store, similar to our decorative and hard goods.

Who is responsible for product selection and helping customers?

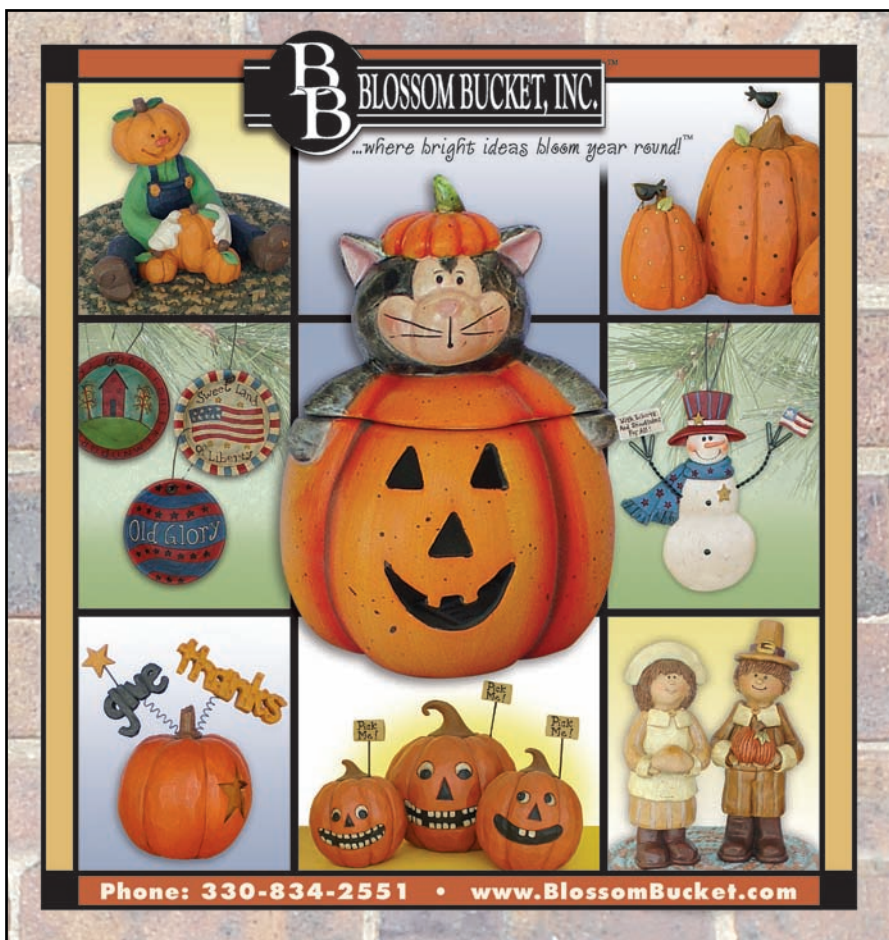
Our decorative buyer is responsible for that.

Does this category bring people into the store more often or when they wouldn't otherwise be here?

I don't think so. I think the activities we offer around children might, but not the merchandise. I think the merchandise is purely impulse. I think there may be some parents whose children particularly like gardening that may come here, but I think primarily they are here for other reasons. 🌱



Hicks Nurseries devotes 300-400 sq.ft. of space to children's merchandise.



Write in 766

DEVELOPING MARKETS

Resources

Trade Shows:

February 20-22, 2006
KIDShow
Las Vegas, Nev.
www.kidshow.cc

July 11-19, 2006
AmericasMart Atlanta
Atlanta, Ga.
www.americasmart.com

October 20-23, 2006
American International Fall Toy Show
New York, N.Y.
www.toy-tia.org

February 11-14, 2007
American International Toy Fair
New York, N.Y.
www.toy-tia.org

Organizations:

Children's Book Council
www.cbcbooks.org

American Specialty Toy Retailers
www.astratoy.org

Association of Booksellers For Children
www.abfc.com

Web Sites:

Child Product Safety Information
www.childproductsafety.com

parents should always be aware of their children in the store.

While garden-oriented children's products can interest kids, a love of gardening is often learned from others. By having enthusiastic employees share their passion with kids and familiarize these young gardeners with plants and garden tools at a young age, employees can help cultivate a life-long love of gardening (and a life-long customer for you).

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1



2



3



1. Garden kit

The Garden Gear kit includes kid-sized gloves, tool belt, trowel, a work zone mat to keep the work area clean, compressed Magic Soil Disks and an instruction/tip sheet. The kit is geared for ages six and up. All materials are designed to be non-toxic and have been child-safety tested. Dalen Products, Inc. (800) 747-3256. **Write in 1516**

2. Plush rabbit

Summer B. Hoppin' is a plush rabbit with shell-white hair. It is fully jointed and has movable ears. The Boyds Collection Ltd. (877) 77-BEARS. **Write in 1515**

3. Window gels

GelGems are a mechanically resistant, semi-solid, thermoplastic polymer that should stick and peel off of clean, dry, smooth, temperate, non-tinted glass surfaces such as windows, mirrors or glass dividers. They are intended to be washable and reusable. GelGems shouldn't leave any marks. Design Ideas. (800) 426-6394. **Write in 1518**

DEVELOPING MARKETS



4. Gardening set

The Manny Mantis gardening set includes kneeling pad, kid's gloves, hand shovel and hand cultivator. Four other character styles are available: Webster Spider, Flutter Butterfly, Buzzby Bee and Dot Ladybug. Insect Lore. (800) 213-6124. **Write in 1512**

5. Tepee

These tepees are available in indoor and outdoor styles and in a variety of fabric options. Outdoor styles are intended to be mildew resistant and can be cleaned with soap and water. Large tepees measure 78 inches high with a 5-ft. diameter at the base. Small tepees measure 64 inches high with a 3½-ft. diameter at the base. Coordinating blankets/playmats, tote bags, personalized name signs and pillows are also available. Tee Pee for Me. (678) 794-2706. **Write in 1510**

6. Customizable flowerpot

The Paint A Flower Pot kit includes two 3½-inch terra cotta flowerpots, six paint colors and a paintbrush. Package dimensions are 5½ x 7 x 4½ inches. Garden At Home. (800) 356-0474. **Write in 1514**

7. Stone kit

Kids' Mosaic Stone Kit contains 3½ lbs. of stepping stone mix, 8-inch plastic octagon mold, stained-glass mosaic pieces and glass gems, wooden mixing paddle and writing tool, instructions and 4-pattern design sheet. Package dimensions are 9.38 x 9 x 2.38. Milestones. (425) 882-1987. **Write in 1511**

8. Play set

Eco Expedition play sets feature characters and animals with posable arms, legs, heads and tails. Different sets are available such as North American Trek, Rainforest Exploration, Australian Walkabout, Dino Dig and Asian Mountain. Wild Republic, a division of K&M International, Inc. (800) 800-9678. **Write in 1517**

9. Teddy bear

Abram is a dark brown and cream plush bear. His snout, stomach and inner ears are cream colored. The bear has an embroidered black nose and wears a brown and cream plaid bow. Three sizes are available: 12, 19 and 35 inches. Gund. (732) 248-1500. **Write in 1513**

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