



SPECIAL EVENTS

Give customers the upper hand by bringing foot traffic and sales to garden centers.

By Catherine Evans

Year after year, garden centers look for ways to bring more customers into their stores. How do they do it: sales, new merchandise, advertising, or is there something else?

Special events are proven to increase foot traffic and sales. They can be held throughout the year for different seasons, holidays, calendar events and many other reasons. Events range from spring festivals to Christmas open houses.

EVENTS

Spring. With all of the new flowers in bloom, spring gives people an itch to get out to the garden and plant. Because of that, many garden centers have developed a spring season opener to bring in customers and show off all of the new flower varieties.

Homestead Gardens in Davidsville, Md., has perfected this approach. They have a week-long flower show in the middle of March that kicks off with a

charity preview party. On the Friday night before the show begins, Homestead offers music, food, a silent auction and a walk amongst the flowers to benefit the Arthritis Foundation.

The Flower Show opens to the public the next morning and offers a number of gardening activities. "If we did not have our Flower Show, we would certainly have less people through here in the next couple of weekends," says Donna Sage of Homestead Gardens.

Homestead's Flower Show also includes a tour of the production facility, as well as week-long gardening seminars. On the weekends, there is live music.

Linder's Greenhouses in St. Paul, Minn., offers customers a chance to see what is new at the garden center with its Annual Spring Open House. In the second weekend of April, The Annual Spring Open House takes customers on a bus tour of the growing range in Lake Elmo, Minn., as well as a walking tour of the garden center. Linder's also offers refreshments and in-store spe-

cial during the open house weekend.

Summer. There are many possible summer events that will attract customers to garden centers. Cindy Krezel from Martin Viette Nurseries, East Norwich, N.Y., describes its summer event, "We hold a daylily festival in the middle of July. That event celebrates daylily dollars, which is an incentive award program for people who are regular shoppers. That whole week, we do educational seminars for both children and adults, and at the end of the week, we culminate with a butterfly release. That is always very popular — it is geared specifically toward regular shoppers and our Kid's Club members." Daylily dollars are given for every \$10 that is spent from Memorial Day to the date of the event. At that point, the dollars can be used for up to 50 percent off of a purchase. There are also educational seminars and workshops during the week of the festival.

The summer is big for Homestead Gardens, as it holds about five different events. The Landscape Design Tour, held in the beginning of June, allows customers to

Left to right: Ray Wiegand's Nursery, Macomb, Mich., celebrates its Harvest Fest with balloon animals for kids; petting zoos are a big part of many garden center special events (photo courtesy of Growing Places); musical entertainment gives onlookers an incentive to stay at the garden center after the poinsettia education at Ellison's Greenhouses' Annual Poinsettia Celebration.

tour the area for landscaping ideas. Homestead also hosts a Watergardening and Wildlife Weekend that gives an introduction into pond construction and attracting backyard wildlife. In the middle of the month, Homestead offers an Outdoor Living Weekend, which has patio displays and demonstrations for the backyard.

In July, Homestead offers two bigger festivals. The Crape Myrtle Festival is similar to Martin Viette's Daylily Festival. Homestead offers a crape myrtle dollar with every \$10 spent, allowing for up to 50 percent off a future purchase. There is live music, seminars and games all weekend, which is also included as part of its own Daylily Festival. Customers come to see all of the new varieties and be part of a container contest. "Traffic-wise, this is generally our biggest weekend of the year," says Sage. "It brings in all these people in the middle of the summer."

Fall. Fall brings nice weather and is usually a good time for a festival. Linder's Greenhouses has an Annual Fall Festival geared toward Halloween. The event features games, a petting zoo, hayrides and more. All of the games are run by nonprofit organizations, and the nursery collects food for a local food pantry. During the two weekends before Halloween, the festival caters to smaller children with activities that are less about ghosts and goblins and more about dressing up and having fun. Lill Linder of Linder's Greenhouses explains, "There are so many frightening things, all the ghost houses and scary things, that are geared towards teenagers, and there is really a lack of things for the littler kids. Our Fall Festival gives them a fun place to go, and it gets the little kids thinking about plants."

Homestead also runs an Annual Fall Festival. For over 20 years, it has had a pumpkin patch where people can choose their own pumpkins, as well as a hayride to visit some lamas. There is a straw maze for children to run through while adults listen to live music and view new mum and perennial varieties. Food and fall decorations are offered, along with plentiful entertainment.

Winter. Christmas is the season when it comes to special events, and Christmas open houses have become somewhat of a staple for garden centers. But because there are so many open houses, it is important for garden centers to do something memorable. Ellison's Greenhouses in

Brenham, Texas holds a huge Christmas event called The Annual Poinsettia Celebration.

Held every year the weekend before Thanksgiving at one of the two Ellison locations, the event invites breeders, growers, consumers and the industry to come see all of the new poinsettia varieties. It also allows the industry to see what the consumers are interested in, and it gives consumers much-needed education about the plants. PJ Ellison of Ellison's Greenhouses says, "We are a working greenhouse, and transforming into an event like this is huge. Most people I talk to in the industry say this really is a one-of-a kind event. To be able to attract that many people in a weekend is quite a feat." Ellison's offers poinsettia displays, educational seminars, entertainment, refreshments and more.

Christmas in New York brings large events, as well. On the third Saturday in November, Martin Viette holds a Christmas benefit. People come to the store, drink wine, listen to music, eat catered food, bid on a silent auction, win door prizes and shop. The event benefits local soup kitchens in the New York area.

At every benefit, the garden center introduces a special ornament, for purchase during that Christmas season, that solely benefits the kitchens. In 2002, \$9,700 was raised from this event alone.

Charities are not the only ones that can benefit during the Christmas season. Linder's Greenhouses has a large Christmas tree lighting ceremony that attracts both customers and media coverage. Members of the Linder's team put up lights all over the garden center, greenhouses and on the property. Television and radio personalities are invited to the ceremony, which also features live reindeer, singers and Santa Claus. "The lighting ceremony gets a big crowd because we have personalities from radio and television, and it is usually on television live. Because we have a good rapport with the weather person on our news station, we light the lights live on her weather forecast. Anytime you can get on television, that's a big plus," says Linder. The event lasts from the middle of November until Christmas.

BENEFITS

Events do tend to bring in higher sales, foot traffic, new ideas, name ►



reognition and even education for both the event holder and the consumer. Ellison feels that her Poinsettia Celebration is a good learning tool. "It tells me what to sell the following year, based on consumer response, not on what someone thinks is going to do well. Another benefit is that we have the opportunity to grow varieties a year before they are on the market." In one weekend, Ellison's Greenhouses had approximately 5,000 people come through their facilities.

Linder's Greenhouses believes that recognition is another important reason to hold events. "There isn't a lot to sell in the fall, so we wanted to have some kind of event that families can come to and have fun — just to keep people reminded that we are open all year, because sometimes they forget about garden centers in the fall and winter," reports Linder. Having fall festivals and Christmas open houses gives customers a reminder that stores are still open and have a lot to offer, even if it is cold outside.

Hot or cold, word of mouth brings interest from curious customers. "We get a lot of word of mouth advertising," says Sage "People say, 'Did you go to the flower show this weekend at Homestead Gardens?' I am always amazed that Homestead had the insight 20 years ago to do events. Now, more and more retailers are starting to do them because they realize it brings in customers." When a big event brings in a lot of traffic, people start talking, and word of mouth goes a long way for retailers.

ADVICE

An idea is suggested, and it sparks an interest. So how can it all come

Ellison's Greenhouses uses hundreds of poinsettias to not only showcase but to decorate as well.

together to be a success? According to the majority of the garden centers we interviewed, it is very important not to be afraid to do something different and to remember that if it doesn't work out don't give up. Sage says, "Don't give up if something doesn't work the first year. It might not have worked because it poured rain all weekend. Don't get discouraged if you put a lot of time and effort into something, and it flops. Also, have someone who owns your events [marketing] and who is going to take care of all the details." Organizing the event is what will make it more successful in the end.

Organizing is not the only thing that will make your event successful, though. Ellison believes it is important to talk to someone that has done events in the past and to learn from them. "Do your homework, visit another major events and meet with someone who has done an event," advises Ellison. There is an art to keeping it simple and yet very effective. I have told many people to be serious enough about doing it to spend the time and money to attend similar events because that money will save you in the long run. Don't launch into something without going to similar events, looking and learning."

Special events are a fun, interesting and educational way to bring customers to garden centers. But hard work and dedication are what really make any event successful for both the holder and the customer. Many garden centers all over the country have events every year that work well, bringing in traffic and popularizing the garden center name.

Each event has its own claim to fame, and soon enough, that fame will be a part of your garden center. Ellison's is known for its poinsettias, Homestead for its Flower Show and so on. People always make mistakes at first, but they keep trying, and the event eventually becomes a success. 🌺

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