



# Tomorrow's Gardeners

Teaching children about gardening is a marketing strategy that your future business can depend on.

**By Jennifer Derryberry**

**C**indy Underwood's job may look like child's play, but this children's gardening program presenter knows that her work is propagating future sales for Pike Family Nurseries. Underwood is the face of the Plain Dirt program, an in-school educational experience that Pike — an Atlanta-area lawn and garden retailer with approximately 20 locations — has presented to more than 60,000 students since 1994. "My main goal is to educate children about plants and how to care for them,"

Underwood says. "That's what the Pike family wants, also. It's the first step in creating a good gardener."

The size and spending power of the children's market suggests that, with proper care and handling, retailers have a lot of good gardeners to grow. U.S. market reports from 2001 indicated 4- to 16-year-old children spent \$107 billion annually, while children ages 8-14 comprise about \$27 million of consumer spending.

## **TEACHING THE CHILDREN**

Teaching children about gar-

dening is not a hard thing to do. In fact, Underwood says, too many children have never participated in any kind of gardening activity, and a disturbing number of them don't make the connection between Mother Nature, the food on their plates and the clothes on their bodies.

"So many young ones, especially in a big city area like Atlanta, don't know anything about gardening. Even for some teachers, it's the first time they've [potted a plant.] This is the children's first time planting a seed," Underwood says. Some

of her smallest students are certain that carrots, for instance, must come from the grocery store. "I pull a plant out of the dirt and pass it around so they can see the roots. When I tell them they eat roots, they're surprised: 'Eeewwww, I don't eat roots!' Then I show them a cotton bush, tell them how it grows and how it's made into clothes. It blows their minds that they're wearing plants. They don't believe you at all."

Pike remedies that by teaching children how to repot a plant, a lesson that's given in classroom

presentations to second graders, in assembly presentations to groups of 150-250 children, and through in-store programs such as last spring's Sowing Seeds for Kids. There's no cost to the children or the schools; Pike provides the plants, soil, pots and *Dirt Digest*, a four-page color newsletter for children.

## MARKETING STRATEGIES

So where does the marketing fit into all this education? *Dirt Digest*, filled with short articles about beneficial bugs, colorful critters, easy gardening activities and word games, carries the store name, logo and contact information. And like all good advertising programs, the rest is word-of-mouth. "I get calls from teachers about parents saying their child held the plant all night because they wanted to take care of it. The children are really excited about taking home their own plants," Underwood says.

Testimony of one Cincinnati-area parent suggests that it takes

a garden center to raise a gardener. Moms and dads can't do it alone. The right products, promotions and in-store displays must channel children's dirt and digging enthusiasm from the store aisles through the checkout and into the garden at home. Gardening dad Brian Sullivan, from Loveland, Ohio, explains:

"I am a parent with three children who want desperately to help daddy in the garden. But all too often, their help actually equates to more work — and frustration. [My wife and I] have tried to find things the kids like to do in the garden that will not make the actual gardening any more difficult...The children want to be right in there with daddy, digging in the dirt, planting seeds and harvesting the fruits and vegetables of our labor."

## A SUCCESSFUL GARDEN

To help parents like Sullivan raise great gardeners, consider these ideas for your children's gardening marketing program: ♦



## CHILDREN'S GARDENING 101

Experts at Texas A&M University's Department of Horticultural Sciences offer some sage advice — for retailers and parents — on how to have fun with children in the garden. Keep it simple, keep an open mind and select appropriate plants:

Morning glories	Sunflowers
Pansies	Potatoes
Johnny jump ups	Strawflowers
Nasturtiums	Zinnias
Snapdragons	Mexican hat
Radishes	Blanket flower
Cleome	Larkspur
Herbs: mint (apple, chocolate), lemon grass, cilantro, basil, oregano and Lambs ear	
Butterfly-attracting plants: monarda, butterfly weed and salvia	

It is important to avoid discouragement and poisonous and sharp plants; encourage exploration; include wildlife and water features; and most importantly be patient and have fun.

At the Growing Place, Aurora and Naperville, Ill., children can play in the sand while parents shop, teaching them to dig for future gardening while keeping them occupied.

**The Eyes Have It.** Shoppers gravitate toward eye-level products — and for children, that means your displays should be 2-4 feet tall. Don't forget bright colors, bold signage, simple sales messages and

price. Keep the message simple and child-friendly.

**Read All About It.** A few good books will put mom and dad at ease. Give children a selection of books ripe with easy gardening activity ideas. A children's newslet-

ter can be printed in mass quantities to control costs; distribute the newsletter during in-store activities for children or with their purchase. Here are some books that give children — and their parents — a crop of helpful ideas:

- *Grow Your Own Flower Garden* by Champion Kids Publication is due out in September;

- *Great Gardens for Kids* written by Clare Matthews and photographed by Clive Nichols gives kids 50 great garden projects and the entertaining and educational activities are illustrated with photos and clear instructions;

- *Garden Fun: Indoors & Out, in Pots & Small Spots* written by Vicky Congdon and illustrated by Heather Barberie explains child-friendly garden activities through cartoon drawings and simple diagrams with a glossary of gardening terms to complete the book;

- *Fun With Gardening: 50 Great Projects Kids Can Plant Themselves* written by Clare Bradley and photographed by John Freeman is a spiral-bound trove of activity ideas;

- *Roots, Shoots, Buckets & Boots: Gardening Together With Children* by Sharon Lovejoy is a collection of a dozen gardening ideas, handy hints and fun activities for all ages.

**Follow the Leader.** More than a few garden centers are retailing to children. See how some of your peers are raising tomorrow's gardeners by visiting [www.pikenursery.com](http://www.pikenursery.com) and [www.hicksnurseries.com](http://www.hicksnurseries.com).

**Go With the Pros.** The Junior Master Gardener program offers ideas for the classroom that can be transplanted to the store floor. Visit [jmgkids.org](http://jmgkids.org) and click on the "About" section.

## BENEFITS

Teaching children about gardening is sure to have a longer-lasting impact on the bottom line of life than your last \$4.99 perennial blow out sale. Research from Texas A&M University's department of horticultural sciences indicates that gardening can improve children's knowledge of nutrition and health and even encourage them to have a more open mind when it comes to trying new vegetables at dinnertime. And that's something parents are sure to thank you for. 🌱

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