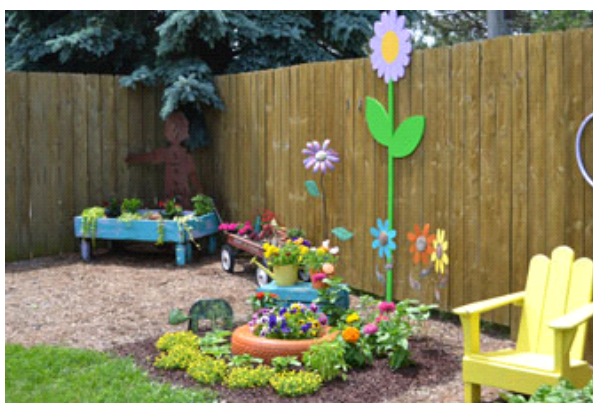


Features

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Engaging Future Gardeners

Elizabeth Davies



On an early spring day, before annuals are planted and sales begin to bloom, row upon row of buds are beginning to grow under the clear dome of Ebert's Greenhouse Village.

Soon, these aisles will be filled with prospective gardeners. But Ebert's isn't just a place for adults to build their gardens—it's also a place for kids to fall in love with plants and flowers.

Pictured: Renee and her team have fun with the kids gardens, often combining dinosaurs and other toys with edible and ornamental plants.

"We try to mix gardening with good, old-fashioned, imaginative fun," says Renee Ebert, children's program director. "It's an investment in the future. When we see those kids come back with their own children, we're building customer loyalty."

A former first-grade teacher, Renee brings her passion for education and love of children to her role at the family garden center she runs with her husband Mark. She remembers the program at its inception in 1990, starting with a Kid's Village that featured small play houses.

"It started out slowly," Renee recalls. "We would do two weekends of activities and that was the extent of it."

Now the program welcomes between 4,000 and 5,000 school children on field trips each year. It also hosts nearly two dozen special weekend events for kids throughout the spring and fall.

"Not only are they here to have fun, but they can learn, too," she says. "If you aren't educating them, you aren't educating the next generation of gardeners."

Springtime brings programs that include an Earth Day writing contest, planting projects for Mother's Day and

play time with bubbles and hula hoops. Kids can play in a giant sandbox, put together gardening puzzles in a one-room schoolhouse and feed stuffed toy bunnies in Cottontail Cottage.

Come fall, the 55-acre garden center transforms into a celebration of autumn, with hayrides and a pumpkin patch. A small petting zoo is added and the Ebert's staff develops a theatrical "story time" that features gardening children's stories. Held in a greenhouse next to the kid's village, up to 100 children can sit on rows of hay bales to listen to a story. It's often presented by Renee herself, dressed in character and standing before a painted set. Children then walk through a maze that features scenes from the story on their way out.

"Storytime was one of my favorite parts of teaching first grade," Renee says. "When we started this, I said, 'I am finding a way to include literature.'"

Offering multi-season programming—Santa makes an appearance there in winter, too—has been a key part of generating business at Ebert's. Some customers, who only know it as a pumpkin patch, will look around and say, "What do you do with all these greenhouses the rest of the year?"

"We try to cross-promote," Renee says. "We say, 'Oh, if you haven't been here in the spring, you have to see it.' They don't realize we're actually a garden center."

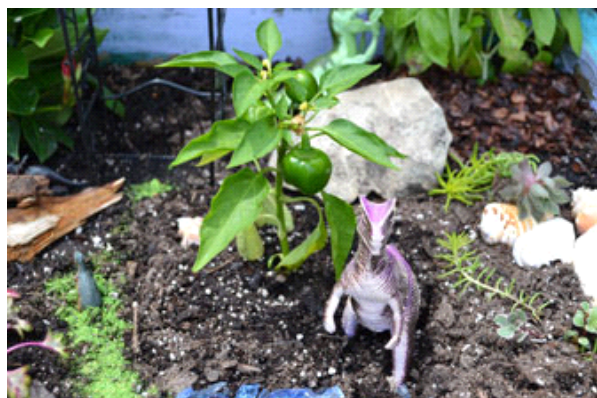
Renee has found creative marketing outlets for her children's programs, including annual appearances at a nearby children's fair and presentations during story time at the local library.

"Renee is always cheerful, positive and energetic, which the children enjoy very much," said Andy Bare, director of the Watertown Children's Fair, where Ebert's offers a planting activity for kids.

At the Oconomowoc Public Library, Renee brings along special plants that she knows children will enjoy.

"One year she brought lamb's ear, so the kids could feel how soft it was," said director Betsy Bleck. "Another memorable one was Candy Corn plant, which the kids loved."

"Parents appreciate the opportunity for their children to have a hands-on learning opportunity and the kids enjoy the chance to get their hands a little dirty and experience something that, in many cases, might be new to them."



Pictured: Renee and her team have fun with the kids gardens, often combining dinosaurs and other toys with edible and ornamental plants.

Ebert's

Greenhouse Village invests a few thousand dollars each year into its children's program, with a heavy amount going to building and maintaining the Kids' Village. But Eberts wants to keep prices reasonable for families who visit during children's events, and she hasn't raised the price for field trips—\$7 per child—in 10 years.

So, she controls costs by being creative with her supplies. Last year, kids had a blast making scarecrow hats out of 40-cent pot liners.

“For the kid’s program, we try to use things we already have,” she says. “It’s the old teacher in me—I can’t throw things away. So we try to use things that are cheap or we can recycle.”

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Renee’s niche with children is the size of her program in such a small, rural community. Located in Ixonia, with a population of 4,400, Eberts draws visitors from a 100-mile radius.

“People come to be here as a family,” said Ann Marie Adams, customer service specialist at Ebert’s. “It’s not just mom and dad coming to shop. They bring their kids because it’s a beautiful place to be.”

That includes nearby resident Jamie Jaeger, who has been bringing her daughters to Ebert’s for the past six years.

“They both love the Kid’s Village,” she says. “They love to go play in the little house, school house and barn.”

They’re also eager to take part in Ebert’s special activities, such as the Teddy Bear Picnic and Fall Festival.

“They are great programs for kids,” Jamie adds. “The storybook they do every year for the Fall Festival is wonderful for children of all ages.”

Starting a children’s program

If you want to launch a kid’s program at your garden center, Renee Ebert has a few pieces of advice:

- Have a love of both kids and gardening. That will shine through your programming and bring customers back.
- Grow it slowly. Don’t try to begin a big program all at once. Find small areas to begin offering kid events and work up from there.
- Choose high-traffic weekends. Even now, Ebert’s doesn’t host kid events during the hot summer months because customers aren’t as likely to come out. That means more staff and an organized plan for the kids.
- Know your budget and look for easy ways to save money. Ask employees to save their old tin cans or egg cartons and use those instead of expensive craft supplies. **GP**

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