

Features

11/1/2017

Taste, Play & Educate

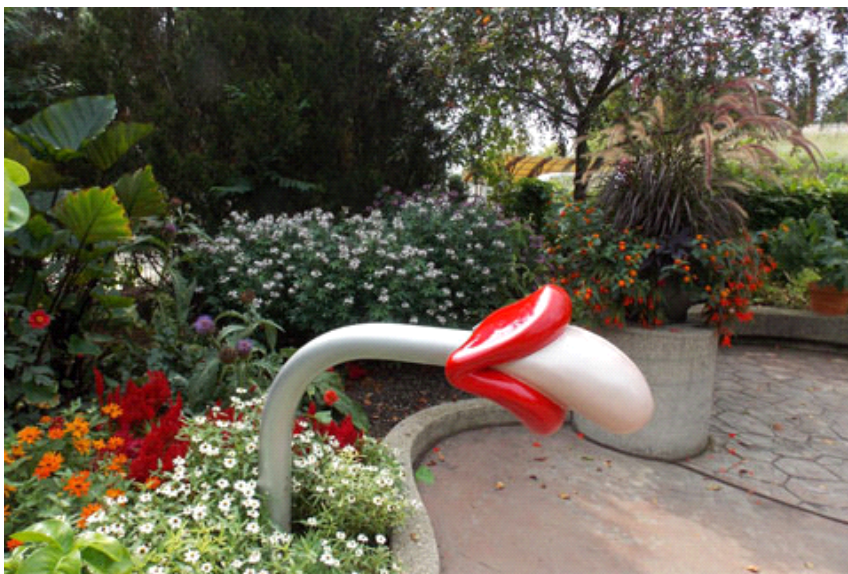
Heidi Lindberg & Bridget Behe

In the third installment of the marketing series, our authors provide a garden center's guide to being kid-friendly.

The average attention span of a 5-year-old child is only about 10 to 20 minutes. Keeping children entertained while shopping can be a challenge, which is why some parents are opting to get their groceries and other products delivered right to their door through services such as Amazon Pantry.

The garden center industry, however, has changing product lines and seeks to attract customers with eye-popping color, flavorful herbs and interesting combinations of edibles and ornamentals. Retailers also are betting on impulse buys. So with the trend towards online shopping and at-home delivery, how can garden centers draw in young families with children?

Remember that these children are also the next generation of plant purchasers for our industry, so priming them in their youth with great plant experiences may help the industry as they grow up and begin their own household. How can garden centers capture the attention of Generation Alpha (under 7 years old)?



Sensory garden at Fredrick Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Sensory Experience

Most children are kinesthetic learners and love to have their hands in everything at a young age. Many botanical gardens, including Fredrick Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have a sensory garden planting edible plants and interesting-smelling plants in their children's gardens.

Similarly, garden centers might appeal to children by setting up a display that has cool and unusual plants, grouped not by plant type, but by experiences. How does the popcorn plant (*Cassia didymobotrya*) smell? What about the sensitive plants (*Mimosa pudica*) that curl up upon being touched? Create some colorful labels and signage at their eye level that would be appealing to children. The Michigan State University 4H Children's Garden has a plant display where kids of all ages can lift a small door and see the roots of plants.

If we take a step back and consider the sensory experience beyond just the plants, what could retailers do? Let's first consider smell and taste. Consider offering free snacks on your big days—popcorn anyone? Garden centers should also consider seasonal food options. Apple growers have long been luring consumers to their farms to enjoy a pumpkin donut and apple cider as nourishment after picking their product. You could even have a photo opportunity spot for the whole family as they enjoy their confections. Kid friendly and bite-sized grape tomatoes enhanced with some fresh basil or parsley can make a tasty snack. Encourage customers to “check in” or create a hashtag (#) for your business to play into social media.

Undercover Education

Fostering a love of reading and education at a young age is critical. How can you play a role in that at your garden center? Consider having a family day at your garden center and marketing children's books next to their respective crops. For example, place a “Jack and the Bean Stalk” picture book next to a bean plant. Or “How Do Apples Grow?” near a bin of freshly-harvested apples from your neighboring farm? Parents will appreciate that you're cultivating a love of reading in a generation who seems to already be wrapped up in electronic devices. Encourage customers to post their pics on Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat so their friends will see the fun they've missed out on.

If you don't want to tie up your sales floor with hardgoods, why not create an interesting garden outside of your store? One idea is to create an alphabet garden where you label plants with their names: A for alyssum, B for begonia, C for canna ... Use this area as another place for social media marketing—especially a selfie near the first letter of the child's first name.



“Hank” begs for a photo-op at Countryside Greenhouse of Allendale, Michigan.

Be Playful

Fairy gardens are, of course, an option to interest children into creating a “living dollhouse.” There are plenty of small toys and miniature plants and shrubs to go along with them. At your next trade show, consider checking out these suppliers and including them into your product line. While some retailers say that this fad is slowing down, others

report that it's still going strong. Also, succulents and terrariums have been trendy for the last few years and including these products lines in the area near the fairy gardens could also help to boost sales at your garden center.

In West Michigan, Countryside Greenhouse of Allendale seeks to be playful in a few ways: Large bears begging for a photo-op, a talking scarecrow hung above a main aisle and dinosaurs on the other side of the fence of their parking lot. Garden centers that target agri-tainment are family friendly and create an experience for consumers.

So how do you interest children in plants creating a life-long interest in gardening? Stimulate them with interesting plants, tasty snacks and fun experiences. Educate them by cross marketing plants with children's books and creating an alphabet garden. And most of all: Be playful! If you're playful, little Maria and Jonny will be asking their parents to come back again soon! **GP**

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