

Features

5/30/2025

Hitting the Trifecta

Jennifer Polanz

Thank you to our Award Sponsors:



It's our anniversary! This year is the 20th year for our Young Retailer Award and we continue to have a difficult time choosing our finalists out of really wonderful submissions from retailers across North America. This year was no different, but our editorial team powered through it to select finalists for this year's *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award. As we've done in the past, we asked them to write an essay (during the busiest time of the year, no less), and this year we asked them for the strategies they think will make independents successful now and into the future.

Read on for their insight and join us Monday, July 14 at the Unplugged Event at Gaswerks during Cultivate'25 to find out our winner.

Meet the 2025 Judges:

Bill McCurry—*Green Profit* columnist and owner of McCurry Associates consulting firm

Kate Terrell—President of Wallace's Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa (and former YRA nominee)

Danny Summers—Executive Director of The Garden Center Group

McKenzie Lain—General Manager, Watters Garden Center in Prescott, Arizona, and 2024 YRA Winner

Q: What are the three most impactful things independent garden centers can do over the next couple of years to be successful? Tell us why.



Krista Devor

Age: 24

Title: Assistant Purchasing Manager

Operation: Lukas Nursery & Butterfly Encounter, Oviedo, Florida

There are so many incredible things to love within the garden center industry. Thinking about what impactful things independent garden centers (IGCs) can do to be successful in the next couple of years was challenging, but also insightful. The first thing I started reflecting on was our mission at Lukas Nursery & Butterfly Encounter. Being at Lukas Nursery for the last six years has really influenced the way I view other garden centers. After some consideration I was able to come to the conclusion of the three impactful things an IGC can do:

- Promote environmental awareness
- Share knowledge
- Adapt to change

These are the three themes I'll be homing in on as the three impactful things IGCs can do to be more successful in the next couple of years.

Working with plants has helped grow my passion for the environment. There are so many elements that come into play with selling plants; it brings you back to what's important—being a part of the environment and getting back to nature. This is not only one of Lukas Nursery's mission statements, but is something positive other IGCs can implement to improve in the future. I believe more people are wanting to help the environment and can do so by adopting more sustainable practices. And garden centers can certainly help customers make impactful improvements. For example, carrying native and pollinator plants is a good first step. Providing resources for customers to create native and pollinator gardens helps the environment and builds success for any garden center. For the last couple of years, I've seen this firsthand, there's been a huge increase in the want and need for native and pollinator plants. This will only continue to grow. I believe this is an opportunity for garden centers to make a positive impact to the environment.

For customers to be successful in their gardens, a well-educated staff is vital. Lukas Nursery has several certified horticulturalists available to assist customers and provide several other educational opportunities for staff and customers. From certifying employees with the Florida Certified Horticulture Professional (FCHP) Certificate from the Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscaping Association (FNGLA) to having several educational seminars by staff and guest speakers for our customers, we're well equipped. Creating educational videos, social media posts and passing out handouts are other ways to help further education. Being able to share knowledge to customers is also what brings them back again. Having the warm feeling of getting a bougainvillea to bloom or your variegated monstera to produce new leaves will always inspire your staff and customers to continue to garden. Providing educational material will surely improve your garden center over the next couple of years.

Like plants adjusting to their new environments, IGCs need to be adaptable to survive and thrive. As the world continues to move more into a more digital age, garden centers need to as well. While more and more people rely on their phones and computers to shop, IGCs need to be ready to adopt to this way of shopping and use it to expand their customer reach. Online shops are beginning to become a normal expectation of convenience. Without a doubt, developing and improving an online shop for garden centers is a challenge. Plants can be easily damaged, as they're perishable and delicate. Selling them online can be intimidating, but it can be done. Offering delivery or pick-

up options are other examples of opportunities for IGCs to expand their reach. Being able to adapt to this new way of shopping will ultimately benefit IGCs in the coming years.

While there are so many amazing things IGCs currently offer, there are also various ways to improve. Fostering a connection to the environment, continuing education and creating an online shopping experience are the three most impactful ways any independent garden center can work on improving.

This industry is the most rewarding field to work in, as there are always opportunities for growth. Watching plants flourish, helping customers find joy in their gardens and being surrounded by natural beauty is something truly special. Having the chance to contribute to this industry and witness its continued blossoming is more than just a job; it's a blessing and a privilege I'm deeply grateful for.

Q: What are the three most impactful things independent garden centers can do over the next couple of years to be successful? Tell us why.



Brandon Kirby

Age: 32

Title: Partner Business Development

Operation: Rainbow Gardens, San Antonio, Texas

Inspiration through education: Your customers crave success. We can't win unless they do. This means inspiring them to use products you sell by thoroughly educating your customers on each product's unique benefit. We have the ability to tap one of the most powerful things our customers possess—imagination. Now is the time to double down on creating and distributing unique content that inspires your customers to engage.

IGCs can create content in a variety of ways—a unique social media video striving to go viral, blogs and classes that pull curious minds to engage with your brand, and handouts to be distributed to customers that answer the questions you've been asked countless times. The content you create becomes your differentiation strategy, the reason why someone visits your store and not another. Differentiation is paramount in a climate where the average American is subject to over 4,000 ads each day. How do we break through the noise? What is your differentiation strategy, the thing you do best? Do your customers know that? The best part is, when you've inspired your customers and have satisfied inspired demand, you earn loyalty. It's our job as retailers to create a place where people can be educated and inspired to experience success, which keeps them coming back to us for many seasons.

Stick to the plan: The nature of our industry is uncertainty. This inherent fact of our industry should not shake your ability to execute. We need to stay dialed in as an industry to take advantage of the momentous opportunity with which we've been presented—as of 2024, IGCs reporting to The Garden Center Group experienced a revenue increase of 28% on average since 2019. Unfortunately, the same group reported a decline in revenue of 12.9% from 2021 to 2024. COVID made acquiring new customers simple—but the measure of true success lies in how much of that revenue we were able to hang on to. Some of the best garden centers in our industry have been able to increase profitability and maintain revenues during this period. The difference? A well-executed plan.

Now is the time to come up with a strategy with clear goals for your team to execute, allowing the company to thrive

well into the future. This plan should include investment in the facility and the team that operates it. A well-run retail operation has your key staff occupying the right seats of a bus whose destination is the mutually agreed upon goal. Empowered teams are more efficient at meeting the needs of your customers. Your plan should include finding the right people for the right jobs and then building an organization where they can thrive. Look around—facilities are one of the biggest contributors to the overall perception of value for your customer. By increasing perceived value, you can increase the tangible value of the goods you sell. If you're struggling to increase customer traffic, how can you maximize the value of each visit? We could all benefit from better in-store signage, developing merchandising strategies that make your facility pop and implementing value-oriented pricing strategies. If you aren't sure where to begin, get involved with a local or national independent garden center peer group.

Leverage online marketing: Garden centers and joy are mere degrees apart and it's our job to let the world know. We need to be sharing the celebration of what we do with our customers every day. Technology has allowed us to excite our customers through marketing in unprecedented ways. Pew Research estimates 92% of Americans have a smartphone. A vast majority of these people are using smartphones to make purchasing decisions every day. Take a look at your online presence—are you inspiring and celebrating customer success? Have you told them that thing they've been looking for has finally arrived at your shop? When was the last time you proved to them that your product possesses superior quality and why?

Your online presence should be a funnel leading customers efficiently to the register. Your online marketing should be optimized for both smartphone and desktop. IGCs should be deploying an array of strategies optimized for these devices—website SEO to funnel local plant-related queries, email marketing with metrics exceeding industry average engagement figures, social media that consistently excites large groups of people. Social media has become one of the best methods to reach consumers under the age of 40; it's your pipeline to sustainable customer growth in the future. If you haven't intentionally developed an online marketing strategy, you should. Today's digital world allows your online marketing strategy to converge the physical and digital third place—something box stores would drool over despite multi-million dollar marketing budgets.

Q: What are the three most impactful things independent garden centers can do over the next couple of years to be successful? Tell us why.



Haley Martin

Age: 33

Title: Nursery Buyer

Operation: B.B. Barns Inc., Arden, North Carolina

Be an active participant in the community: Last September, western North Carolina was hit by the remnants of Hurricane Helene. It would go on to become the deadliest hurricane in the U.S. since Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane-force winds and over 30 in. of rain reached areas of the mountains typically untouched by past hurricanes, causing record-setting river flooding, over 2,000 landslides, an extreme loss of tree canopy and other extensive damage in the Asheville area that we're still recovering from today.

At B.B. Barns, we always strive to have a strong connection with the community through personal relationships, as well as financial donations and sponsorships. In the days and months since the storm, our focus has shifted. We're now taking a more proactive approach to community involvement by reaching out to organizations, neighborhoods and individuals rather than waiting for them to come to us. Simply being available to help is no longer enough.

Intention, of course, demands resources, so we've committed additional budget dollars to support these efforts, ensuring we have the means to follow through with them.

One of the projects we're most excited to be working on is in partnership with the PBS program "This Old House." We'll be installing the landscapes for three homes being rebuilt in the Beacon Village area of Swannanoa, one of the hardest hit areas of WNC.

During this time of rebuilding and replanting, we've been given the unexpected opportunity to make better plant choices, ones that provide more ecological value to our landscapes. Retail staff, as opposed to the plant breeders and growers, stand in the principal—and oftentimes powerful—position to directly affect the choices of customers. Wise (or frankly poor) choices add up from one backyard to the next, creating a measurable impact on the climate resiliency of a community.

In order to be successful through increasingly frequent extreme weather, community involvement must become a priority. Think about how your garden center supports your own community. Who are the people that need help that haven't asked for it? Garden centers aren't charities, but what knowledge, skills or resources do you have that could be beneficial to others?

Maintain strong partnerships with growers/suppliers: One of my favorite parts of my job (besides driving the forklift) is meeting growers and touring nurseries. Much like how one should know where their food comes from, garden center staff at all levels should know where the plants come from, why we buy from particular growers and who the humans are that grow the plants that fill our tables.

As a buyer, I know that the endless search for the lowest price simply doesn't work for long-term success. It's more important to do business with growers who I can trust to provide high-quality material, administrative ease and collaborative problem-solving when things go awry. Building and maintaining those relationships will lead to success.

One way to strengthen those relationships is to look inward. Do you treat your suppliers as long-term partners or short-term need fillers? Do you work collaboratively or are you adversaries when issues arise? Do you ask for feedback on how you can be a better customer? As with personal relationships, your relationship with your suppliers takes continual effort from both parties to be successful.

Take care of your employees: Much like the importance of buyer and supplier relationships, a strong relationship between employer and employee is crucial. The people you hire, and most importantly retain, have lasting effects on future success.

First and foremost, find your city's living wage and pay your core staff at or above that threshold. Much like being proactive with community engagement, be proactive with taking care of your staff. Other benefits shouldn't be discredited, but a living wage is what puts food on their tables at the end of the day.

Another often-overlooked trait of a healthy employer and employee relationship is trust. When employers trust their employees, they don't micromanage, misdirect or withhold information. Trust your employees' differing perspectives on the business. By no means do you need to execute every suggestion, but when trends develop among your lines of communication, take note.

Other ways to care for your employees are to find opportunities to employ skilled individuals year round, to foster a culture of continual education and to promote people when they deserve it, even if you have to create new positions for them. It takes a special type of person to thrive in garden center work, so when you find those people, make their worth known.

When considering the most impactful things garden centers can do to be successful, I'm delighted by the things we're doing right, but I (and I hope others) acknowledge our shortcomings and hold us accountable. Accountability and tough conversations open doors to future success. **GP**