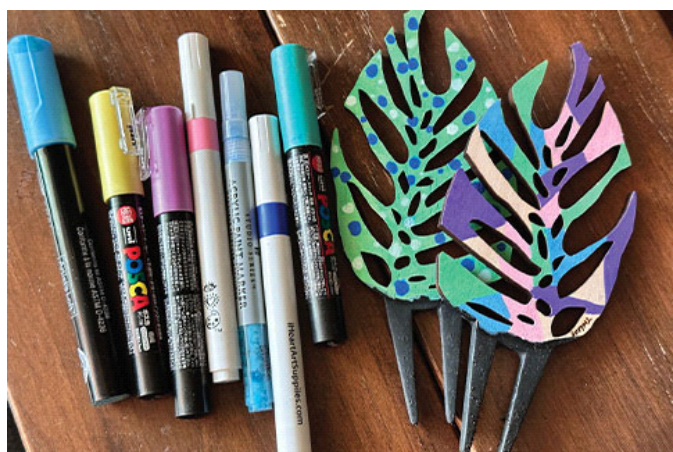


## Features

8/31/2026

## Make It & Take It to the Next Level

*Katie Elzer-Peters*



Welcome to part three of our series exploring this maximalist, dopamine-chasing (June 2026), makerspace-frequenting (July 2026), creative explosion of a summer. There's no other way to describe the absolute mobs of granny hobby crafters cartwheeling straight into packed breweries, clothing stores, bakeries, community buildings and, yes, garden centers—if you're up for it.

*Painting Treleaf trellises was one of several art activities Katie Elzer-Peters led during sessions at Cultivate'26 with attendees.*

I'm reporting in after Cultivate'26. On the Saturday of the show I led 100 people simultaneously making garden vision boards, painting Treleaf trellises, creating air-dry clay sculptures, assembling watercolor collage cards and hammering flowers (thank you for the hammers and bags, Melinda!). Jessie Jacobson, owner of Tonkadale Greenhouse in Minnetonka, Minnesota, said, "I really liked talking with the people at the table. It was easier to chat when we had something to do with our hands. And we will be making vision boards this winter."

The day after my craftstravaganza, Katie Dubow, President of Garden Media Group, presented the 2027 Garden Trends, "Dopamine Digging," featuring very analog hand lettering and drawings from the GMG team.

"People are searching for reasons to put down their phones and disconnect," Katie said. "Gardens are the ultimate dopamine destination."

Monday at the conference, I wheeled my "Wagon O' Fun" around the convention center, picking petals and leaves from different brand displays (with permission) and making cyanotypes. Cyanotype is a printing technique developed in 1842 using treated papers exposed to sunlight. After exposing the prints on the patio outside the cafe, I got my buddy Scott Sterling from Dramm to help me develop the prints on the trade show floor by spraying them with his professional mister. (Hooray for a collab!) Upon developing, the petal shapes turn a stark white with the background oxidizing into a deep blue: Garden Media Group's 2027 color of year.

"Blue is the color of calm," Katie said. "And we're all overwhelmed."

“Have you noticed that everyone’s making cyanotypes?” I asked her.

“Yes! And they’re the perfect activity because each one is stunning and you really can’t mess it up,” she replied. She wondered if I often hear people say, “I’m not creative. I’m not artistic,” when I teach classes.

“All the time,” I said. “But people desperately want to get together and create, so I’m constantly looking for activities that don’t have a ‘right way’ of doing things.” (And I’m always trying to involve plants because I love plants and they’re easy to incorporate in almost every hands-on activity as either inspiration or as the materials themselves.)

Even when there’s a “right way” of creating something, like the paint-by-number Dreamscape Hydrangea mural Bailey Nurseries facilitated at their Cultivate hallway display, people still line up to participate. Coloring in a giant drawing with big, fat acrylic paint markers? Yes, please! At the BASF booth, everyone played with LEGOS. Ball FloraPlant featured creatively configured carnival games and Darwin Perennials built a participatory putting green. Plants Nouveau debuted a new line of cut flower genetics with a cut flower bar display. Co-owner Angela Treadwell-Palmer said, “People couldn’t stop touching the Cotinus flowers.”

### **Build an On-ramp to Fun**

TL;DR: People want to play. They want to make stuff. They want to put their phones down and pick up a pair of pruners, a paintbrush, a crochet hook, scissors and a glue stick, an acrylic pen, a plant. They’re lonely and want connection IRL (in real life) and the traditional places and spaces offering connection opportunities have mostly disappeared.

I’m optimistic that retail garden centers can provide solutions and so is Katie. People have pent-up creative energy to burn, and when given an outlet, they exploded.

“I could feel it at Cultivate the whole time,” Katie said. “And there was a stark split between AI slop and really creative, homemade artistry—you were creating art the whole time on the floor!

“After the trends presentation I could really feel people leaning into the artistry side. The trends gave them concrete ways to make the garden a dopamine destination.”

“Didn’t you guys make dopamine menus at your client breakfast?” I asked.

“We tried!” she said. The concept is pretty new, but one that garden centers could implement. Dopamine menus are, essentially, a list of activities, a way “in” to something.

“Again, people are overwhelmed. They go to the garden center with thousands of plants and they freeze,” Katie said. “You could point them in the direction of a plant for one purpose. Give them choices, like buying one pollinator plant.”

We chatted and I riffed on the arts and activities direction of dopamine menus, “You could give them ideas and options like, ‘Go on a color hunt’ or ‘Find different leaf shapes,’ in addition to shopping, of course.”

But, seriously, what if you helped your customers and visitors experience and enjoy your garden center as more than a place where they could buy plants? What if you built some dopamine on-ramps?

Here’s how two garden centers—one in Reno, Nevada, and one in Cincinnati, Ohio—are doing that.

## **Selling the Dream in Artown**

Deanna Gescheider is an owner of and the director of strategy and community engagement for Moana Nursery in Reno, Nevada. She sent Jen Polanz a press release (Thank you! Please do that if your garden center is doing something cool. We want to know!) about their event, "Garden is Art," a month-long exhibition at the garden center held in conjunction with Reno's Artown celebration.

"July is a pretty dead month because of family vacations. It is hot here and nobody wants to be in their gardens," she said. "So how do you combat that?" (This is why I'm pro plant-centric art activities.)

She said, "We take advantage of things that are going on in the city, like Artown, and that has been successful." It works for Moana because of their commitment to experiential retail.

"We're doubling down," Deanna said. "It's an investment. We grew 250 containers that aren't actually for sale. We're selling the dream. These containers are examples and people come in and make their own."

Moana tracks the success of this event by reviewing the growth in annual plant sales year over year because that's what goes into customer-created containers.

Art extends beyond the containers. Moana commissioned a local artist to paint huge murals inside and out, and purchased a custom metal tree sculpture from Burning Man artist Jeff Schomberg to display in the courtyard.

"It's plumbed for irrigation so we can hang baskets and there are also lights at the branch tips." The artist created metal birds that sit on the branches, and are also available for purchase in the garden center, letting customers take part of the event home with them.

"We also held an exhibition of art from our team members and smaller pieces from Emily Reid, the mural artist," said Deanna. "Everything but two pieces sold."

In addition to the increased transaction counts for a traditionally slow month, the event generated tons of content for marketing and social media.

"It was a huge win for enticing people to visit. And, of course, the artists had their own followings that stopped by."

For kids, Moana hosted a ladybug release with paint-a-pot stations, interactive herb displays and the debut of their new stem studio. By the end of our conversation I wished I lived anywhere remotely close to Moana because it's clearly where the action is.



Moana Nursery held a “Garden is Art” event in conjunction with a larger art event in their town of Reno, Nevada, including art exhibits, inspirational mixed containers and hanging baskets and metal art.

### **Casting Spells in Cincinnati**

White Oak Gardens appeared on my Instagram feed when they hosted a watercolor workshop in their greenhouse last winter. It turns out that the instructor was one of their former employees who'd gone back to his roots teaching art and brought it back to White Oak Gardens to provide customers a creative outlet in the middle of winter.

I talked with Mason Sillies, the marketing coordinator, and Kathy Ross, who leads the make-and-take classes, about the unique experiences White Oak Gardens offers.

“The kids like glue!” Kathy said. During their Little Sprouts programs they always have a craft and learn about plants. “For St. Patrick’s Day, we ate lots of green things. I’d hold up a vegetable and ask them what it was. Kale was not popular.”

But the program was, especially with parents. “One of them said to me, ‘I didn’t know my kid ate broccoli!’”

In 2026, the White Oak team created a program for 6 to 12 year olds called “Enchanted Garden,” which features a class every other month all year long. Kids and families paid for the whole year up front, chose a time slot (there are three) and came at that time every month. Kids got to know each other and so did their parents. The program (which warrants its own article) was the brainchild of an employee who was reading the highly popular wizard books with their child at the time.

With sessions on weird and wonderful carnivorous plants, herb potions, falconry and more, the Enchanted Garden required the creativity and manpower from almost every division at the garden center.

“Our staff loved collaborating with each other,” Mason said. “A lot of times you just stay in your own unit, but when I came on board I thought, ‘I have ideas, but so does he, so does she and we need help from everyone.’ Putting on this program has been a great team builder for employees.”

And that’s what all of this is about. Connecting through creating. Leaning into experiences. Because like Maya Angelou said: People won’t remember what you said or did, but they will remember how you made them feel. And nothing feels better than a hit of dopamine—especially when it’s chased with a plant or two. **GP**

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