

## Features

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### Cheap Tricks: Mother's Day Magic

*Ellen C. Wells*



The second weekend in May can make or break a garden center business. Put the odds of success in your favor by planning an event or preparing special products for Mother's Day now. We've gathered some ideas from garden retailers across the country for you to use as you choose!

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#### Essay Contest

Ten years ago, Gail Vanik and the folks at Four Seasons Greenhouse and Nursery in Dolores, Colorado, got the idea to start a Mother's Day Essay Contest to encourage gardening and also help develop reading and writing in the local elementary schools. It also was a way to draw families into the garden center on that critical Mother's Day weekend.

Each year Four Seasons would send a letter to the local schools (and home schooling groups, too) around the time of Spring Break—March or so—that would give students in Grades 1-6 the opening sentence for that year's essay, which would be something along the lines of "My mother deserves flowers for Mother's Day because ..." After the submission date, Gail would then invite friends of the garden center to gather for a potluck luncheon, during which they would read and award first through third place for each grade. Prizes ranged from a potted geranium for third place to a 10-in. hanging basket for first place. The teachers of the winning students and the essay reading volunteers would also be given a gift certificate.

The children and their parents would then be encouraged to come into the garden center on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday of Mother's Day Weekend to pick up their essays. "Everybody wants to see what their kids wrote about them," Gail says. And of course while they were in the store, they were able to see the beautiful flowers and plants for purchase. "It definitely did bring people into the garden centers who might not have come in otherwise," Gail says.

That first year they received about 200 essays. Over the years the total became closer to 1,000! At that point, the essay contest grew into something larger than what Gail and her staff could handle. "The kids get tired of having to write the same essay year after year," Gail says. "Currently, we're in a 'rest' mode. Most likely we'll pick it up again in a bit."

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## Walking Garden Tour

"We started an annual walking garden tour with our local garden club years ago and it is always the day before Mother's Day, so we are dressed to kill and really show off who we are to all the moms that come through," says Toni Palafox of Mission Hills Nursery in San Diego, California.

The garden club is now in charge of the garden tour, but because Mission Hills Nursery helped launch the tour about 15 years ago, the event always starts at the nursery, where folks pick up their tickets and maps for the day. "It brings them into the nursery, which is nice," Toni says. And it's not a small group, either. Toni estimates more than 1,200 people attend, really boosting nursery visitors for the Mother's Day holiday.

Toni says her son Tiger (Green Profit's 2012 Red Fox/Young Retailer Award winner) is able to see the tour gardens prior to the tour day as a member of the garden club tour committee. He makes note of the plants that will "wow" the visitors, and makes sure the nursery has them in stock.

How do they make sure folks come back to buy? They have a promotion in the garden tour booklet that offers a discount at the nursery for the rest of the month. "It's not only great for the community," Toni says, "but it's also great for us because it exposes us to people who didn't know we were here."



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### Orchid Delight

"Orchids are always a sure sell for us, in a pretty container and we always restake them with some curly willow or other decorative branches, and a pretty bow.

—Kris Blevons, Oak Street Garden Shop, Birmingham, Alabama



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### Grab & Go

"I make containers to fit a fast "grab and go" price point like crazy! Between \$19 and \$45 is about perfect. And I make them VERY feminine, lots of pink, white etc."

—Christina Salwitz, garden writer, photographer, principal at The Personal Garden Coach and co-author of *Fine Foliage*, Renton, Washington

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### **Tea and Cookies**

“This is a big holiday for our gardens because the fuchsias and begonias are in glorious bloom. We do something a little bit different: Mother’s Day Tea and Cookies under a canopy of blooming hanging baskets.

“We set up tables with pink cloth real tablecloths, teapots, glass cups and an arrangement on each table. The cookies are advertised as homemade, and they are homemade thanks to Krustease cookie mix for making that easy and inexpensive.

“This is the time for visiting families to take a few minutes and sit down together with Mom or Grandma to actually talk and listen, to tell her how much you appreciate her or share stories from the past. We say the best gift of all is the gift of your time. The families like it and it grows every year with folks coming year after year. Of course, we have plenty of everything for them to buy for Mom and they always do buy.

“This all started a number of years ago when to our shame I saw an adult daughter with her mother set up a little spot for a drink and some cookies and the only place she could find to set up was on a few cement blocks. We now have lots of bright colored chairs all over, all year!

“Mother’s Day Tea and Cookies is the Saturday and Sunday of Mother’s Day weekend. Do we get more business? Who knows—but it is still our gift to mothers everywhere and gives everyone good positive feelings about our nursery. Besides that, it is a mini event and gets us free press releases in the local news media.”

*—Evelyn Weidner, former owner of Weidner’s Gardens in Encinitas, California, who says she will still be helping with the annual Mother’s Day Tea and Cookies under the flowers*

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### **March Planting for May Flowers**

Garden Crossings in Zeeland, Michigan, does something fun as a pre-Mother’s Day experience. They have a container planting open house in March where they invite people in to plant hanging baskets and containers. They also have tours and kids’ activities at that time. The baskets are ready for pick-up about six weeks later, conveniently timed for Mother’s Day weekend.

“We also do field trips at our garden center,” says Garden Crossings’ Heidi Grasman. “We invite schools in and give the kids a tour, read a story about plants and then let them plant their own basket. We grow these baskets and then have the kids come back with Mom on Mother’s Day weekend. It is a good marketing idea to bring the parents back and it’s also educational for the children

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### **Gift Cards That Give**

“Here in Zone 5 it’s hard to purchase plants that early for Mom, so we always have a gift card promotion. For every gift card over \$25 they receive a free mini rose all dressed up to give to Mom.”

*—Karolyn Wagler Fournier, Colour Paradise Greenhouses, Kitchener, Ontario GP*