

## Features

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### Socializing Gardening

*Heidi Lindberg & Dr. Bridget Behe*

Many garden retailers strive to market a fresh offering and continue to try to reach the extra-coveted demographic: the Millennials. The Millennial generation is becoming a key demographic for garden centers as that age cohort reaches adulthood, buys a home or starts a family. How can garden centers lure these new customers into their retail centers and excite them about gardening?

Retail managers are trying to recruit the new customers with innovative marketing strategies that play into the fact that today's consumers (especially the Millennials) want so many things to be a social event—including decorating their urban chic balconies or their new single-family homes. Here are eight “social gardening” ideas for you to try at your business as part of an innovative marketing strategy.

#### **Appeal to the Foodie in All of Us: Taste-offs**

Everyone loves to eat and it's even better with your family and friends. Most people don't like to eat alone and many people today spend so much time looking at a screen that they crave the socialization of food—they want to eat together. To capitalize on this trend, host cooking demonstrations or cook-offs at the garden center to increase foot traffic, support other local businesses, and create a social and memorable experience for customers.

For example, Heeman's Garden Centre in London, Ontario, hosted a strawberry brunch. Will Heeman, chief daymaker (and last year's Green Profit/Dümmen Orange Young Retailer Award winner), said the brunch attracted approximately 1,000 people during two hours who came to taste delicious strawberry crepes and even strawberry-bacon jam developed by local chefs.

Lowe's Greenhouses, Florists, & Gift Shop in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, hosted its second annual Basil Festival on June 10. Lowe's Greenhouses President Jeff Griff commented that the event not only entertains people, but also allows them to connect with their community and be social. Jeff hopes that the basil festival joins their other trademark events, such as Sugarplum Dreams. That's where Santa, live reindeer and 'Mater from the Disney movie “Cars” make appearances to benefit Santa's Hideaway Hollow, a charity for terminally ill children. Both Will and Jeff mentioned that the additional revenue from the events cannot touch a spring Saturday, but they both feel that the events deepen their relationships with their customers and community.



## Cooking for Kids

As younger people begin their family, they continue to seek some fun, memorable, social activities. Heeman's Garden Centre capitalized on this trend and also began the event "Cooking in the Garden" this year where children can actively participate in cooking their own omelets with fresh ingredients from the garden. Children learn valuable life lessons, such as cooking and the origination of their food. Then the children plant their own herbs and tomatoes into the eggshells to

take home and plant into their own garden. This event seeks to pique the interest of the next generation of gardeners. Since kids can't drive, their parents (or grandparents) share in the experience. Even these young children want their friends in on the fun, so it becomes more of a community event.

## Wine Planting Parties

Why should we leave all of the fun for the kids? Adults like to be social among themselves. Try bringing in the adults for an event with lush wines or cool craft brews! Koetsier's Garden Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, developed the Bloom Studio, which is a space where they can host planting parties with drinks and snacks. Wine and Design Wednesdays occur on Wednesday evenings at the Bloom Studio. Consumers can enjoy designing their summer containers while socializing with friends and family. Space permitting, this type of activity might pair well at a local vineyard or craft brewery. Take plants to where the people are socializing to find another opportunity.

## Planting Parties for All

Koetsier's Garden Center also uses their Bloom Studio for private parties. From bachelorette parties to church groups, the studio is bustling with activities. Customers buy the containers and the plants that they use when planting up a fall masterpiece or a whimsical winter container. So many other industries have capitalized on the socialization trend: jewelry, make-up, painting, etc. Now is a great time to plan some spring fun. Hosting a parent/grandparent and child planting party would bring in one demographic, while the "girls night out" might bring in another. Planting can be fun and the customers will enjoy the planted containers long after the party is over.

## Finding Your Zen: Yoga Classes

Many consumers are not only more interested in food and where their food comes from; they're also interested in fitness, health and well-being. Terrain Garden Center in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, hosts many events in order to integrate their business with their customer's lives, including yoga classes. There's a bountiful amount of research showing that gardening can be therapeutic, but Terrain has taken it one step further. Yoga classes entice their customers to come together, provide customers with physical activity and meditation, and allows them to bond with each other upon leaving. After all, maybe those attendees will purchase one of the many succulent bowls or terrariums on their way out. Plants can be part of a healthy

lifestyle, so think about hosting a class for a few weeks and see what the turnout is like.

## Triathalons or 5K

Triathons, 5Ks and marathons have been increasing in popularity with athletes. Why not host one at your greenhouse? On September 16, Countryside Greenhouse of Allendale, Michigan, will be hosting its third triathlon. The first year drew about 100 athletes, while the second year drew double that. Dale Buist Jr. of Countryside Greenhouse hopes that they'll be able to yet again double the number of athletes participating this year. The event in past years generated the largest sales outside of the spring season for Countryside Greenhouse. Lots of planning and volunteers do make this type of event a bit more challenging to organize, but it may be just the thing to put your garden retail center on their radar screen.

## Carmel Macchiato Anyone?

Consumers love meeting friends for a cup of coffee and a tasty pastry—why not make your garden center the backdrop? Offering consumers with a nice place to sit and enjoy a steaming beverage lets them relax and enjoy the moment. Coffee shops are much more common in garden centers in Europe than in the United States, however, Terrain Garden Center offered a place for consumers to enjoy drinks and take a break from shopping. Consider teaming up with a local vendor so the burden of licenses and meeting food regulations doesn't fall solely on your business. There are probably many budding foodie entrepreneurs who might be interested in vending (seasonally) at your garden retail center.

## Cross-Generation Programming

Consumers are always looking for activities that they can enjoy with family members of other generations. Heeman's Garden Centre hosts a food truck event every year, with this September marking the fourth year. It's grown from six food trucks to seven or eight food trucks for a couple of thousand people offering treats, such as donuts and grilled cheese.

Will Heeman reported that the events created a huge uptick in the foot traffic, resulting in a 150% increase in sales from other years on that day. Not able to host an event at that scale? Try a smaller mother/daughter activity like the Mother/Daughter container gardening parties at Koetsiers Garden Center. These events also offer parents what they really want: time with their children while doing something fun! **GP**

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