

Features

10/1/2017

Allied Forces

Beth Engle

The idea of “horticulture entertainment” is trending among retail garden centers and why not? Public gardens have been doing it for years! Offering special programs to draw people through the doors not only encourages and inspires attendees; it gives them reasons to keep coming back. Statistics indicate that such events offer the single biggest return on investment for garden centers nationwide.

Of course, this is only a sound strategy if you have the resources to host and conduct these types of events. Many retailers rely on their own staff to put on events, sometimes at the expense of other work. This is understandable, and even essential, as the event will take place on your premises. But what if you could get an assist—and a side of plant-geek know-how—by enlisting the help of local or regional plant societies?

Expert Enthusiasm

Many plant societies are, sadly, in decline today due to lack of support and waning membership. However, what they lack in headcount, they often more than make up for with passion and enthusiasm. Can you think of any plant lovers more dedicated than those who belong to your local garden club, orchid society or bonsai group? These folks not only know their subject thoroughly, but they often have plant interests that go far beyond the focus of their society. What a wonderful resource for you and your customers!

A society-led program affords the opportunity to draw customers with plants, sure, but that’s only the beginning. Can you imagine talking about bonsai and not discussing the pots needed to grow and display them properly, with examples demonstrating their proper use? Or the specific needs for different types of orchids, including pots, slabs on which to mount orchids, chemicals to treat pests, even the bark mixes and/or sphagnum in which (or on which) to grow the plants?

Partnering with garden clubs and plant societies can be a win-win. You can become the go-to source for your customers’ specialty plant and peripheral needs. A retail garden operation in the Chicago area invited the local garden club to help out at one of their events and rewarded every volunteer with a 10% off coupon. I’m confident that the usage of those coupons was close to 100%—I know I didn’t miss a beat in using it! Without it, I might not have bought any plants that day; the coupon was just the right incentive, at the right time, for me to open my wallet.

Society members may also be a source for your future part-time or full-time employees. On the flip side, many

societies would jump at the chance to share their love of plants, raise awareness for their organization and potentially recruit new members!

Don't forget about possibilities beyond plants, too. Other organizations and local botanic gardens may be good sources for programs around birding, trees or other aspects of your product offering.

Do you know about the Christmas Bird Count held each year? It's the longest-running citizen science birding project and encourages many people to become more involved with birding, both in the greater outdoors, as well as their own backyard. Having an event around this activity might be a great promotion for the bird section of your store and encourage your customers to expand their use of the products you offer.

What about offering space to your local plant society during a slow weekend for their next meeting or event? I know a couple of orchid societies who've partnered up with a local retail greenhouse to hold their shows.

Society Name	Website
The African Violet Society of America	www.avsa.org
American Bonsai Society	www.absbonsai.org
The American Daffodil Society	www.daffodilusa.org
American Dahlia Society	www.dahlia.org
The Gesneriad Society	www.gesneriadsociety.org
American Hemerocallis Society	www.daylilies.org
The Herb Society of America	www.herbsociety.org
American Hosta Society	www.americanhostasociety.org
American Orchid Society	www.aos.org
American Rose Society	www.rose.org
Arbor Day Foundation	www.arborday.org
National Audubon Society	www.audubon.org
Perennial Plant Association	www.perennialplant.org

Don't Be Afraid to Reach Out

By the same token, if you're not working with your local botanic gardens, are you missing out on getting more outreach? Perhaps you could provide plant material at low or no cost for some of their classes in exchange for your promotional materials being handed out supporting your products, services and/or events.

Are you ready to reach out, but not sure where to start? We've compiled a list of some national organizations here; many will direct you to their local or regional chapters and, in some cases, offer a list of speakers who may be interested and available to present at an event you'd like to hold, speaking on a subject about which they're passionate. Many speakers are capable of addressing a wide range of skill and experience levels, from beginner to advanced.

To spark the interest and inspiration that drives traffic to your store, partnership is the name of the game! When like-minded plant lovers and outdoor enthusiasts come together, the results can be positively infectious. **GP**

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