

## Features

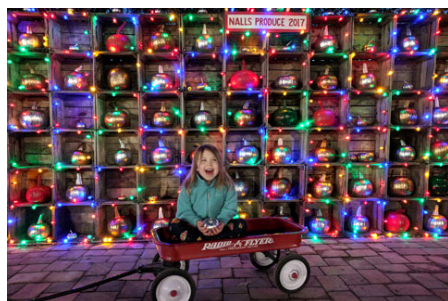
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## The Conversion Game

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Beginner gardeners are a huge group of customers, or potential customers, that might help give your garden center the sales boost you need for 2018.

They lack confidence and have limited knowledge of the basics that us professionals can take for granted, but they already have some interest in working in the yard. They're eager to learn and try, and will be very loyal if you prove your worthiness by showing patience and nurturing support. But before you can earn the loyalty of a beginner gardener, you first have to get them into your shop. Here are some ways you can attract local beginner gardeners to come check you out before the competition.



### Drawing in the Parent Crowd

Beginners often have young families and are looking for activities to do on weekends that are centered around their children. Think of some complementary events, workshops or activities you could offer that might attract children. Fairy gardens are a great workshop to offer—come up with a low-cost, kid-friendly option. Sell the tickets online through Eventbrite, and once the families arrive for the workshop, educate the parents on how to care for the planter using simple terminology. Give them a handout that

includes all your contact information and any other upcoming events that might appeal to them.

*Pictured: Providing a photo op for things like Christmas cards brings in new customers, while crossing another item off a grateful parent's to-do list.*

Another great activity for children is to paint pots and then plant vegetable seeds in them. It's simple and low cost, and you can be sure to establish yourself as the expert on vegetable gardening. Have a "Vegetable Gardening for Beginners" workshop on the upcoming agenda so parents can sign up while the concept is top of mind.

These children's events should be advertised to local Mom's Clubs, PTAs, Girl and Boy Scout troops, and any other local parent organizations you can. You need to get new folks in the door that have some interest in gardening and then convert them into customers. Be sure to get their email address so you can communicate with them in the future.

Also, realize that not all events at your shop have to be based on gardening. Host a block party or a movie night, invite a family photographer to use your property or even a birthday party for your resident pet, and invite the community, particularly young families.

## Use Your Seasons

Another great way to attract beginners to your garden center is to promote gardening basics during seasonal periods. For example, when you carry pumpkins in the fall, use beginner-friendly marketing tactics to promote pansies. The pumpkins might be what made them stop in, but educate them about how simple it is to be successful with pansies and encourage the beginner to give it a try.

Make sure the seasonal display areas are cross-merchandised with gardening-related signage, information and displays. You don't want your sales area to be separated into gardening and non-gardening.

## In for Food (Or Something Else), Out with Plants

Does your garden center sell gourmet foods? We're all aware of the growing trend of stocking some consumables, with one of the reasons being that they attract non-gardeners. If your shop has chosen to stock gourmet foods, gifts, pet supplies or any other non-gardening related products, make sure you capitalize on that stream of customers. Use your POS system to identify your customers that only purchase gourmet food, or gifts, or whatever your complimentary category is, and design and send them a targeted email series about gardening. Use simple terminology and end the email series with an offer, like a class or club or workshop that's coming up that would be suitable for someone just starting out. Make it clear in your word choice that they'll be made comfortable and will NOT be made to feel stupid or inferior because of their lack of experience and knowledge.

Another great way to make the most of your gourmet food department is to sell live herb plants in your shop. Market the plants as easy for beginners, with clear instructions on how to care for them. Your customers will buy the live plants to use for dinner tonight, then try their hand at keeping them alive, since the thought of saving money and growing their own will be attractive.

You could then take it one step further and use that POS system to track the individuals who purchased the herbs. After about 10 days, when you know they might start to have some trouble if they're still on the kitchen counter in the original pot, send a personal email that says, "I see you bought some fresh herb plants. How are they doing? Do you have any questions or need any advice? Just reply right to this email and I will help you out, and there's no such thing as a silly question!"

It's amazing how many replies you receive—including ones that might have nothing to do with the herb plant—just by asking and encouraging a conversation. Also, as a little benefit, if a customer ever replies to one of your emails, their email provider will be more likely to identify future emails from you as important and not spam, keeping you out of the "Promotions" tab and spam folders.

Attracting and nurturing beginner gardeners could be just what your shop needs to have the revenue jump for the next season. You just need to find those families and individuals in your community that need some extra support and be the one to provide it to them. Instead of focusing on finding new customers that are already shopping with the competition, find individuals who aren't really shopping anywhere and make them loyal to YOU, and grow the pool of customers as a whole. **GP**

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*Valerie Nalls is vice president of Nalls Produce, a garden and produce retailer in Alexandria, Virginia, and the creator of Botanical University. If you'd like to learn more about Botanical University, and online course for new gardeners, email her at [valerie@nallsproduce.com](mailto:valerie@nallsproduce.com).*