

## Cover Story

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## Mo' Money

*Ellen C. Wells*

Garden centers have two seemingly opposite scenarios that both result in missed opportunities for sales: in the slower seasons before and after the spring rush, and in spring when sales associates may be too busy to assist customers. Think of those times as cash sitting in limbo, just waiting for you to set it free to find its way into your tills.

*Green Profit* has found three retailers who have handled each of these situations.

### Slow-season Subscriptions

Smith's Gardentown in Wichita Falls, Texas, was experiencing slow sales during the winter season and was pondering ways to bring in some cash. One son, who worked outside the family business, thought a type of subscription service—paying in advance for services throughout the year—could solve that problem, but what service could customers subscribe to?

That's when another son, Michael Fiore, hit on it: a subscription lawn product service. "People always had to come in here to buy pre-emergent and the other products," Michael says. "We wanted to make it easier for them." Not only would a subscription service be more convenient, but it would also keep Smith's from losing out on sales from the folks who forgot to come in or skipped one of the four-per-year lawn applications.

For a yearly fee paid in January, Smith's Gardentown will deliver the pre-emergents and fertilizers their customers need at the appropriate times of year. Customers are also given a letter with application instructions.



Katherine Smith, Michael's mom, thought measuring the yards of each subscription member to determine the amount of product they need might become too much work. But her son assured her there was an easier way. "We go onto Google Maps, and bring up the satellite image of the property and I can measure their lawns that way," Michael explains. Genius! "We have a scale we use to determine how many bags of each product they'll need. Then we come up with a price for the products, and add on a delivery fee."

Now in its second year, Katherine says "it's been met with almost instant success. We pitched it as, 'You know you have to do this, but your problem is remembering when.' So many people come in six weeks late and say I know I should have done this earlier but I forgot. This way we can be sure we are capturing their business."

Smith's Gardentown promotes the program via Facebook, e-newsletters and television spots. "We'll put on another big push at the end of the year to advertise it as a good Christmas present so they can start the following year with the service," Katherine suggests.

*Pictured: Michael Fiore prepares to make a scheduled delivery for Smith's Gardentown's subscription lawn service.*

## Slow-season Senior Workshops

Tina Bemis of Bemis Farms Nursery could be crowned the industry's Workshop Queen with the number of programs she runs year-round. Never one to sit idle and wait for customers to come her way, Tina found a new source of workshop attendees last year. She made a color flyer which she sent to 30 local senior centers, advertising her availability for bringing the workshops to them during her nursery's slower times in late June, July, September, October and late December.

"I had 10 new senior centers booking three or four classes a year, and every year after, I hope," she says. "This is targeted, focused advertising to a special group, not a 'spray and pray' typical approach to advertising that many of us do that appeals to the masses yet has little return."

Her late June and December classes use surplus inventory, so she's using up product that might not sell otherwise. Tina calls the late December workshops

Centerpiece Surprise "because I really don't know what will be left, but it's that much less that will be packed up in the barn!" she says. And the classes bring in cash when sales at the garden center are in a lull. "I don't sit around and hope people will come in or call," she said. "I am always actively trying to engage new people with a personal approach."

Tina also added more libraries to her workshop list this year. "They often have dollars in their budget already, so participants come for free," she says.

**If you're interested in learning how Tina creates and puts on her workshops, she has a free downloadable book at the topic that you can find at [www.ThatWorkshopWoman.com](http://www.ThatWorkshopWoman.com). She's also speaking on the topic at this summer's Farwest Show in Portland, Oregon.**

## Busy-season Garden Contest

Nothing sells garden plants better than a garden display. Roger's Gardens in Corona Del Mar, California, installed seven themed display gardens before they opened this spring in order to communicate to customers about different types of gardens and what they'll need to make it happen.



One of those display gardens is of a “California-Friendly” garden, complete with plants that they recommend for California’s weather. For the last 11 years Roger’s has held a California-Friendly Garden Contest, and the display garden helps inspire customers not just for the contest but also for installing California-friendly gardens in general.

“We don’t particularly look to our California-Friendly Garden Contest as a sales driver,” general manager and vice president Ron Vanderhoff explains. “Instead, as a leader in the gardening community we believe that

some portion of our efforts at Roger’s Gardens need to be brand supporting and support our position as a leader of the gardening community. Having an attitude and even an opinion can be an advantage that is unique to community-based independent garden centers and an important differentiation from other businesses. In ways it communicates to our community and shoppers a social conscience, which is something that more and more consumers are considering when they make their purchasing decisions.” While Ron says he can’t pin a specific dollar amount to sales generated by the contest and the display garden, he’s hopeful that Roger’s Gardens’ role as a leader and influencer has indeed generated some sales. The contest and the display gardens are supported by signage, labels, online information, blog posts, community outreach and seminars. **GP**

*Pictured: Roger’s Gardens has held a California-Friendly gardening contest for more than a decade. A display garden helps show customers what is possible in their own yards.*