

Features

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An Affair to Remember

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It was in our first year of business that Planterra, my family's greenhouse company, landed our first big contract with a wedding. As the legendary story goes, it was 1973 and a fashionably dressed lady drove-up to the greenhouse in a yellow convertible Mercedes Benz. She walked into the greenhouse with her event planner and looked around. She said: "I'll take it." My dad was confused. He asked: "You'll take what?"

She replied: "Everything! We want every single plant in your greenhouse to decorate my daughter's wedding."

Back then our first greenhouse was small. It was a 1,500-sq. ft. Lord and Burnham structure that we rented on a historic estate property. Nevertheless, it was the big break that helped start the business we have today.

Over the years, Planterra has offered plant rentals for special events in our local metropolitan Detroit market. Within the past 10 years, we adapted our new greenhouse facility, the Planterra Conservatory, to host weddings and events onsite and we now host more than 80 weddings per year. This didn't replace our traditional plant rental business, but it did require us to hire our own in-house event planners and designers to produce full events.



Here's what we've learned over the years for operating successfully in the events space.

Simple & Flexible: For traditional plant rentals, a menu with too many options will eventually cause a problem when someone cannot get the exact plant and size that they feel you promised. Therefore, instead of offering a 10-in. Peace Lily, offer it as a medium-sized plant with a number of acceptable options or subsections. This is like how cars are rented at the airport. You get a mid-size sedan, which could mean a Toyota or a Chevy.

Service is King: A wedding is more than an event, it's showbusiness. If one component doesn't arrive on time, it can have a cascading effect on the entire event timeline. This is a couple's most important day with no chance for a do-over. The biggest struggle greenhouses have with events and weddings—including plant rentals—is service. The delivery, installation and on-site adjustments make a big difference in a successful execution. If you don't have the manpower to deliver and pick up items on weekends or afterhours, if your staff doesn't have the skills to finesse the finishing touches, you're better off partnering with a florist or event planner to manage those details.

Sell Via Florists and Event Planners: If you don't have an in-house floral design and sales department and don't plan to start one, we recommend you don't offer plants for events directly to the public. Instead, partner and sell through independent florists and event planners. Let them jump through the hoops and be the buffer between you and the bride. Even with cash-and-carry sales, be prepared for DIY brides. If you decide to offer a retail section for the wedding market, be sure to revisit your return policy.

Watch Celebrities: At the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011 (watched by hundreds of millions of people), the couple installed six 25-ft. maple trees and two hornbeams inside Westminster Abbey. This single event caused churches around the world to update their decorating policies, mostly prohibiting trees. Such trends aren't exclusive to large mainstream events like royal or even celebrity weddings. At Planterra, we've been asked to recreate wedding scenes from the vampire movie "Twilight" and more recently the opulent wedding scene in "Crazy Rich Asians."

Get Creative: If you have a creative team, events and wedding design is an excellent opportunity to let them shine. Renting just ferns, Spathiphyllums and Areca Palms is the commodity part of event rentals. A premium can be earned renting the specialty elements that make an event special, such as arbors or Chuppah's, interesting topiaries or any kind of blooming feature that will make for a picture-perfect moment. **GP**

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