

## Features

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### Events with Panache

*Anne-Marie Hardie*

There's no question that garden centers have evolved from a place for purchasing products to an experiential destination. The garden centers in this story have gone even further, taking their event planning up a notch to create a space where consumers can peruse products, absorb the atmosphere and transform from casual shoppers to lifelong customers.



#### Fostering Connections Through Local Food

Sometimes, all you need to spread awareness is some good food and conversation. Tying into the local food movement, Bloomfield Garden Centre in Calgary, Alberta, invited guests into their store to experience their one-of-a-kind, sold-out Forage on the Farm event.

"We did it because there was so much more going on our property than the garden center," says owner Wendy Zak. "We wanted to show them the sort of food that we can eat is growing all around us—there's a lot of wild, local produce."

Before sitting down for the meal, Melanie Isles, Full Bloom Herbals, took the guests on an exploratory adventure both around the farm and into the greenhouse. During the journey, guests discovered a variety of culinary weeds, edible flowers and produce, which they were encouraged to pick and add to their plate.

"The foraging element added in something a little different, that really encouraged the guests to get out there and explore," says Wendy. The foraging was followed by a family-style meal featuring local produce, created by local Chef Nicole Cordes from Back to Good, a market and deli. The whole event lasted approximately two and half hours.



#### Crossing Generations

For the past 20 years, Swansons Nursery in Seattle, Washington, has welcomed the community with their Reindeer festival, a family-centric experience with 11 interactive stations, including live reindeers, a yurt photo-op and pictures with Santa.

"We wanted to create a wonderful place that the whole family could come to," says Aimée Damman, director of Marketing and Communication. Guests have the option of taking a self-guided tour or to be guided through

the stations by one of Swansons' employees. Nestled amongst all of the holiday decor is Swansons' 20-ft. by 10-ft. model train village. This year's theme is Frozen Scandinavia, where two trains travel through the landscape, while children play a seek-and-find activity.

For those shoppers who're wanting a more adult-centric event, Swansons hosts a charity holiday gala donating all proceeds to the Ballard Food Bank. An age 21-plus ticketed event, it includes wares from local artisans, an onsite photographer, live music, food and drinks. Last year, the entire event raised \$15,000.

Swansons also made it easy for customers to share their experience by creating a variety of focal points throughout the store. If customers share a photo via social media with #sharingSwansons during the Reindeer Festival, Swansons donates one item of food to the Ballard Food Bank. Last year, the company donated over 300 pounds of food.



## So Long Open House, Hello Soiree

For decades, Bradford Greenhouses Garden Gallery in Barrie, Ontario, launched the holiday season with a two-day exclusive open house, inviting their reward program customers to an exclusive shopping event. However, last year, they decided to ramp it up a notch and launched a holiday party that includes live entertainment, hor d'oeuvres, wine, craft beer, a holiday decorating demonstration, a fashion show and more than \$4,000 in prizes. The ticketed event provides guests with an opportunity to experience the magic of the holiday season while crossing off items on their shopping list.

## Going Back to the Basics

Rogers Gardens in Corona Del Mar, California, is no stranger to major event planning. In fact, for several years, the nursery launched a massive holiday season opener, including several food trucks, vendors and even a skating rink.

"We kept building up the event until it became bigger than the shopping experience—it became a show," says Eric Cortina, creative director at Rogers Gardens. "We soon realized it was taking us away from being a great retailer."

They made a somewhat controversial move and stopped their holiday event. Today, the garden center runs several mini events and workshops throughout the season, including spring, Halloween and Christmas events.

"The amount of effort that we used to put into our events we now put into our displays and workshops, including creating a display experience for both Halloween and Christmas," he says of the boutique experiences. Shoppers ventured on a storytelling journey through Malice in Wonderland, this year's Halloween theme, and the Enchanted Garden at Christmas, as they shopped for new products that they could introduce into their home. Make-and-take and holiday décor workshops round out the experience.

However, the garden center did host a new foodie event this year called Passport to Luxury Chef's Challenge, a ticketed event where chefs from local restaurants prepared signature dishes and guests tasted and voted for their favorites, all in the name of charity. Nearly 20 local eateries participated, including Farmhouse, the restaurant at Roger's Gardens. **GP**



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