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Inspiring Gardeners

Jennifer Polanz

This year's trio of *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award finalists go to great lengths to delight new and returning customers.

Every year we go through dozens of nomination forms to find our Young Grower and Young Retailer finalists, and every year I'm impressed at the amount of talent out there in our industry. This year was no exception—these three finalists for our *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award rose to the top due to their engagement in their local communities and in the industry, the impact they've already had on their operations and their continued dedication to moving garden retail forward.

Here you get a chance to "meet" them on the page and at Cultivate'21 in Columbus you'll get a chance to meet them in person. We'll announce our winner at this year's Unplugged Event (in person!) Monday, July 12 at Gaswerks (note the location change—it has more outdoor open space). I hope to see you there!



Terra Campbell

Title: Greenhouse Department Head & Greenhouse Buyer

Age: 22

Operation: Round Rock Garden Center, Round Rock, Texas

Q: Who are your new customers, and what are you doing to attract, keep and educate them?

As I walked down the beach with my aunt, we found a place to sit and enjoy the view of the bright orange sun hitting the water on the horizon. People would walk past us and everyone would greet my aunt by name. She would know exactly who everyone was and would follow up with them. I asked her how she knew them and for how long, and she said most of them were

customers at the restaurant where she worked. Even at a young age, I was impressed with how she remembered and knew everyone so well.

She put her arm around me, leaned her head against mine and said a few words that I vividly remember to this day: "Always remembering someone's effort is a reflection of their interest in you!" Everything felt so serene.

My aunt was a waitress at a local restaurant in Kihei, Maui. In her free time, she would volunteer at a nonprofit organization that would focus on cleaning up the beaches and oceans from debris. While I was visiting, I admired how dedicated she was at both working in the restaurant and volunteering. Everyone could see the passion in her

eyes, and it was right then that I realized I wanted to have a similar passion and be truly dedicated to a bigger purpose.

I have found that purpose in educating people about gardening. It has been three years since I started working at Round Rock Garden Center, although it feels like I've been here much longer. I cherish every single moment with my new family, which includes my wonderful team members and customers.

I have come to value all of the friendships I have made with my regular customers and look forward to the relationships I will make with my future ones. When I speak with them, it feels like I am talking to a friend or giving a family member advice. I want them to feel welcomed and know that I am here whether they have any questions regarding gardening or just need someone to talk to.

Cultivating strong relationships with our customers is pivotal to the growth of our business. Not only does it get them to come back, but it gets them to talk about gardening to their friends and encourages visits to the garden center. Once you help someone become more successful in gardening, it can inspire others to give gardening a try!

In my time at the garden center I have learned a lot. It feels as if I'm still in school, as I learn something new every day. Not only do I get to learn about horticulture, but I have been attending business classes with The Garden Center Group as well. I have the privilege of buying, pricing and displaying new plants, as well as hiring new people for our amazing team. I have introduced weekly gardening classes. These classes allow me to help educate fellow gardeners on how to make their plants thrive and have ultimate success.

We also host youth classes so we can educate our next generation on the importance of gardening and keeping our planet a clean, green space. During the pandemic, we encouraged our customers to do safe gardening projects at home. We realize that no matter what age, or how long you've been gardening, there is always something new you can learn.

The new generation of customers have started something that is very beneficial to us: free advertising. People nowadays take photos of everything and there is no better place to take photos than a gorgeous garden center. When a customer sees something beautiful, they take a photo and share it, which is why I took the initiative to make our end caps look more inspiring and eye-catching.

We added informational signs about the proper way to take care of their new plants, as well as any tips that we can offer from personal experiences. I have also created informational pamphlets on different plants about their care. Customers have proved to be so interested in these that we have to reprint about 100 every week.

In January 2020, I had the amazing opportunity to attend the Tropical Plant International Expo in Florida. I was able to meet with some amazing vendors who were willing to share their unique ideas. I was in awe looking at all the beautiful plants and displays. I was walking up and down the aisles, looking at everyone's outstanding creations, and that's when I saw it ... the wall of plants. I knew right then that we had to have one in our greenhouse.

When I flew back to Texas, I started right away to build our very own. After a couple of weeks, our plant wall was complete and ready to be put out on display! Every day we have people taking pictures in front of our plant wall with the turquoise neon sign in the background that reads, "Round Rock Garden Center."

Everyone loves a good photo opportunity, so having a photo area is a great way to have customers take photos with our logo in the background. It always makes us feel so proud to see photos of our customers sitting in front of our wall. We know that they feel the same joy that we do when we are spending time at our garden center.

In my tenure at Round Rock Garden Center, I have learned more than I ever could have asked for. Not only has my knowledge about horticulture expanded, but I've learned about the importance of having an amazing relationship with

our customers. I have been able to share my knowledge, as well as further develop my own understanding of the gardening industry.

Targeting new customers is important to the growth of the business, but the target should also be to find a way to keep our loyal customers attracted. Being nominated for the Young Retailer Award and to be considered a finalist has been such an honor; I would like to dedicate this privilege to all my existing and future customers. Thank you for allowing me to pursue a job I am truly passionate about.



Esmeralda Carrasco

Age: 24

Title: Vice President of Operations

Operation: Ponderosa Cactus, Tucson, Arizona

Q: Who are your new customers, and what are you doing to attract, keep and educate them?

My parents started Ponderosa Cactus in 1988 with all of their money, which was \$600. They began with the native plants from the region that was on their land and created a storefront that would be open to the public from which they could sell what they harvested.

Ponderosa Cactus is one of the few nurseries in Tucson, Arizona, that have the original family still owning and operating the business. My parents were the main reason why I never left Tucson. Even though my parents did not go to college, they pushed education on to their four daughters. With my parents' support, I was able to get into one of the top business schools in the nation and gain skills that I could use to help the business. I had the opportunity to go to the corporate world after my undergrad at the University of Arizona, but decided to stay and help Ponderosa Cactus instead.

I was able to continue my schooling and received a Master of Business Administration in 2019. As I am currently completing my Doctoral Degree in Business Management, I can operate and expand Ponderosa Cactus by connecting with our consumers and understanding the market needs, and pivoting the business when it shifts. With this degree, I will help my parents and continue the dream of creating a more sustainable environment for others in our community.

Throughout the years, Ponderosa Cactus has prided itself in creating storefronts that are welcoming and inviting and provide insight into how to care for plants. In the past seven years that I have been involved heavily in operations, we allowed our mission statement and values to guide our decisions on how we identify new customers, attract new customers, retain existing customers and provide education to both of the above.

New Customers

Our new customers range from young children and designers to our elderly community members. Ponderosa Cactus is a plant nursery that is focused on being accommodating to our consumers. We help the children with understanding responsibility and caring for a plant at a young age. We create an experience for our new gardeners and help them choose a plant that will encourage them to continue to garden.

For our designers, we lay out the nursery to help them understand how to understand plant combinations better. We make sure that the spaces are clean and clear for our elders for smooth walking and make sure we do all of the

heavy lifting. Our new customers are attracted to our social media advertising, community connections, education through various clubs we are sponsors of, and friendly conversations in the community that invite them to the nursery. Our new customers are attracted to our array of products and ability to source some of the unique plants in the world. From starter plants to 100-year-old cacti, each product has a story and we are here to share our knowledge with our new customers.

Attraction

Ponderosa Cactus attracts more customers through advertising, online social media and referral programs through our point-of-sale system. Creating interactive advertising allows future customers to understand our products and have fun learning about the different services we have to offer. In interacting with our prospective customers, Ponderosa Cactus takes this as an opportunity to showcase our 500-acre growing grounds, give sneak peeks of products and provide more education about evolving plants.

The moment that customers call, email or walk into our nursery, we are treating our guests as family. We have developed a strong community bond and allow our customers to interact with all team members. Once we attract one customer to our nursery, we allow our services and products to speak for themselves. Customer reviews and other forms of word-of-mouth advertising play a prominent role in attracting new customers. We excel in customer service and provide an experience in every instance of connection we have with the public.

Retention

To us, retention of our current customers is one of the most manageable parts. It is easy because we care about our customers and allow ourselves to develop an environment of trust and honesty. We developed an email campaign that allows us to connect with our customers. After gathering information from our customers in our point-of-sale system, we can gain feedback from them and understand how their experience was in the storefront. Customers can input information about themselves, like their birthday. With our email campaigns, we are able to share exciting upcoming events, new products and general information. Our point-of-sale system has the capabilities to reward customers that come in the store often and also invites customers that have not visited in a while. In addition, with up-to-date technology, we also make sure that our team members get to know our customers on a more personal level.

Education

The moment a customer walks through our gates, we educate them about sun and water requirements with the layout of the store. We have our more sensitive items under shaded ramadas or large trees on the property and our more resilient products in full sun. When our customers have questions, we answer all of them to the best of our abilities, and if we do not know the exact answer, we find a way to connect our customers with an expert. Throughout the year, we hold educational workshops that create a fun and welcoming environment, and allow our customers to come in and learn.

Some of the most memorable educational workshops are our "Bring Your Own Container." At this event, we invite our customers and community members to bring in an empty pot they may have at home and allow our customers to be guided by our team members to fill the pot up with something that will thrive in the customer's garden. At this event, the customer is repotting their newest plant and understanding the importance of rich soil, transplanting needs, pruning and nutrients for that particular plant to thrive. Ponderosa Cactus prides itself on this event and we have received a large amount of feedback that allows us to help other gardeners become experts of the plants in their garden after this event.



Wyatt Page

Age: 25

Title: Garden Center Assistant Manager

Operation: Gill Garden Center + Landscape Co., Corpus Christi, Texas

Q: Who are your new customers, and what are you doing to attract, keep and educate them?

Our new customers since the pandemic are a wide-ranging group of people with varying levels of gardening experience: people who want to learn to grow their own food, parents who want to spend time gardening with their children, new homeowners adding beauty to their homes, and apartment and small-space dwellers interested in caring for houseplants.

It's difficult to put everyone into a category, but they all have one thing in common—they're gardening to benefit their health and wellbeing. On top of the pandemic, we experienced a 100-year freeze in early 2021, which caused another spike in customers who need (not just want) to bring nature back to their space.

We are lucky to work in a field that can truly help people. That has become very apparent as we met new customers over the past year. A lot of people not only needed activity, but needed a release from the stress of the pandemic and to feel some sense of normalcy. On the positive side of things, the pandemic has shown people how important being outside/in/around nature is to our mental health. I get to talk to people every day about gardening. I have numerous customers tell me how great it is to be able to walk outside every day and garden. Getting to hear customers' excitement about attracting butterflies into their own backyard or cooking something from their first veggie garden is a great reminder of how beneficial our industry is to the wellbeing of our customers.

Two years ago, the whole industry was brainstorming trying to figure out how to attract new customers. Now, we're trying to keep up and keep them coming back! One of the best ways to keep customers coming back is to do everything we can to help them be successful gardeners. That means educating our employees on all the plants and products we carry. Not just our sales staff, but everyone from carry-outs to cashiers to receiving staff.

All of our employees interact with customers and customers come to us seeking reliable information. I hold a 10- to 15-minute huddle every morning with my team, which gives us time to discuss new products arriving for the week, tips and care for specific plants, and common questions we are hearing from customers. This helps enable our employees to better serve our customers. When our customers see their plants thrive and feel successful, they keep coming back.

I also believe that happy employees lead to happy customers and happy customers return. I make it a point to check in with all my employees every day to make sure they understand what tasks need to be accomplished and to find ways to assist them in getting the job done. These are not just intense and stressful times for customers, but also for our team. A pandemic and record-breaking sales put a lot of pressure on you mentally and physically. I find it helps to check in, make sure employees are doing okay, and let them know that we value and appreciate them.

Educating our customers is another great way to keep them coming back. Our most effective tools to connect with customers are our weekly newsletter and social media. We always focus on timely advice for gardening in South Texas. We are not able to catch every customer when they come into the store, but we can always encourage them to sign up for our newsletter and follow us on social media. These outlets empower the customer to learn at their own pace and on their own time, and take action on things that are happening in their garden right now. Whether it be a bad bug, a new plant variety or lawn care, we cover a wide range of topics to make sure customers have access to the information they need to be successful.

Since the big increase in customers started, we have been focused on how-to videos on different gardening topics to demonstrate useful tips and tricks for gardening. These videos have been especially helpful since the big freeze. We were able to reach lots of customers with short videos on popular landscape plants in our area, showing customers how to diagnose freeze-damaged plants and giving advice on what they can do to save them, and if not, the easiest way to replace them. We get a great response to the videos; customers interact and ask more questions, and many of them comment on how relieved they are just to have the right information.

It is great to be a part of an industry that has made such a huge turnaround this past couple of years. Our staff has stepped up in a big way. We are working longer hours, working faster, solving new problems and still having fun! Everyone feels the momentum and excitement. We have known all along that gardening is good for you and now so many new people are feeling the benefits. We expect that some may not stick with it, but others will become life-long gardeners. To play a part in that discovery is so rewarding.

Meet the 2020 Judges:

Bill McCurry—Green Profit columnist and owner of McCurry Associates consulting firm

Kate Terrell—Store Manager of Wallace's Garden Center in Davenport, Iowa (and a former YRA nominee)

Danny Summers—Executive Director of The Garden Center Group

Lindsay Squires—Community Development Manager & Events Manager, Tagawa Gardens, Centennial, Colorado & 2020 Young Retailer Award Winner

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