

Make an effort to inspire young gardeners to create your future customer.

Growing Future Gardeners

by Ellen C. Wells
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Attend the New England Spring Flower Show in March every year for a bit of a reprieve from winter. My eyes are wide with beautiful landscapes, perfectly executed floral displays and gifts and gadgets galore. But what

puts the biggest smile on my face is the children's horticulture competition. Flowering cherries in full bloom are wonderful, but I see them every year. I go to the flower show to see what

crafty plant projects the kids have toiled over during the last few months. There's always some unbelievable project put together with Popsicle sticks, glitter and a squash plant. It takes me back to my own first-grade, bean-plant-in-a-milk-carton project. I was so proud of that bean plant, and it gives me joy to think these kids are experiencing the same thing.

I don't have children to garden with, but I feel childlike when I dig in the dirt each spring. As garden professionals, I think we all feel the magic of the gardening process – planting a small speck of a seed and watching and caring for the life that unfolds from it. What's even more magical is passing the secret of gardening along to children. Sure, there are plenty of

children's gardening products we can sell to parents. But when directing your efforts toward the "child" demographic, your task is to develop a child's natural love of digging in the dirt and eventually turn it into a love of gardening and the natural world. Create your future customer.

Keep Them Entertained

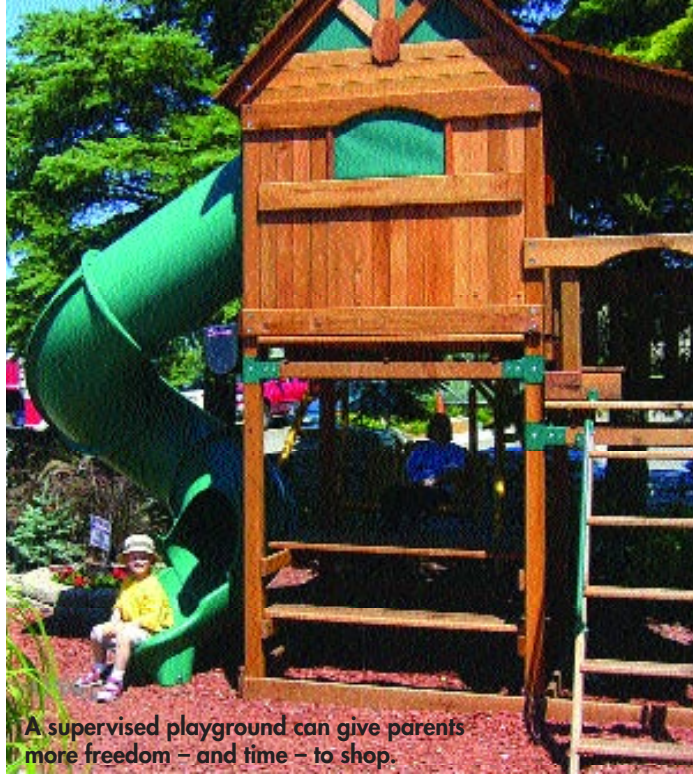
To create the budding customer, you will need to hack through a child's firewall – mom and dad. If you help entertain their children in some way, you'll definitely get a parent's attention. Farm stands or pick-your-own operations commonly lure families with popular activities such as hayrides, corn mazes, interactive harvesting and tastings. These are usually autumn-related activities for farms, but some of the same concepts may be appropriate for garden retail operations. Create seasonal family festivals that allow children to interact with plants in some way. In spring, let children pot up their own marigold in a milk carton and see how

herbs can be used to make a tasty pizza. There are many opportunities in fall to create Halloween crafts from dried and living plant materials. Many garden centers already have festival weekends. Make an effort to get children involved and it may become a family tradition.

Many retailers – from movie theaters to grocery stores and gyms – offer some sort of childcare while parents shop, watch a movie or do their workouts. Consider a form of "kindergarten" for your busy mom and dad customers – some secure and supervised area at the garden center where children can "garden" on their own while their parents shop. Instead of tagging behind parents bored out of their minds, let children discover how fun gardening can be with a "No Parents Allowed" garden meant just for them. Be sure parents know about your "kindergarten" options with signage, posted hours, upcoming special children's gardening activities and so forth.

Nurture The Young Gardener

Would Mozart have been a great composer if he hadn't seen or heard his first piano? Kids need to be lured away from television and video games in order to develop an awareness and appreciation for gardens and nature. One of the best ways to introduce children to the wonders of gardening is letting them experience the variety of life that exists in the landscape. Children go on tours of museums or petting zoos – why not garden centers? Offer to take school groups on



A supervised playground can give parents more freedom – and time – to shop.



Gardening Through The Ages: Kids



The Backyard Bunch by Insect Lore, are quality tools marketed directly to kids.

educational tours of plants and gardens in your own retail operation. Include in your tour how different plant and flower shapes work in the landscape – how bulbs grow, how strawberries crawl along the garden, how flowers turn into pods, seeds and veggies, etc. The garden is filled with all sorts of tidbits that curious little minds will soak up - and their parents might learn a thing or two themselves.

Bookstores offer many different titles on gardening with children that are filled with simple and creative parent-and-child projects (see below). Help parents discover their little gardeners by offering a family workshop based around two or three of these projects.

Or prepare a series of children's gardening workshops throughout the summer. You'll be helping parents entertain their kids by offering an activity. And the workshops will help instill an appreciation for gardening and the natural world. Local children's authors, educators or groups such as 4-H are great resources to consult with.

Tools For Tots

You wouldn't accept inadequate tools for your gardening work, and children should be given the same consideration. When offering child-size gardening tools in your retail operation, consider that weak "toy" plastic hoes and trowels may be more harmful than good for children. Not only might these tools perform their basic operations poorly, they may also snap under the force of a frustrated child.

Insect Lore, a maker of children's nature kits, is introducing a line of children's gardening tools and accessories. The product line, called The Backyard Bunch, is specially designed for ages 4 and up, and includes a galvanized metal watering can, wood and metal construction shovels with rubber handles, high-impact plastic shovels, durable cotton/poly gloves, cotton gardening aprons and thick foam kneeling pads. The items are designed around five different colors and insect characters. These types of tools make gardening an enjoyable, entertaining and educational activity rather than something thought of as a chore.

They're All Winners!

To build up a child's confidence in the garden, they need to succeed. Satisfaction with an outcome – a seed that's sprouting or a plant that produces something edible – will go a long way in developing their love of gardening. Gardening projects should be limited in length and complexity. Give them tasks that can be completed within the allotted time and offer some time for discovery of new and interesting garden concepts. Materials should be consistent between children – this prevents Johnny and Susie from grabbing other children's "better" supplies. And if a kid feels the need to pull up a petunia to learn about the roots and soil, let them – as long as they are in a workshop and not in your perennials department. TGC

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Children's Book Bench

Keep these in your bookstore or combine in a "Kids Only" display with accessories.

"Roots, Shoots, Buckets And Boots: Gardening Together With Children" by Sharon Lovejoy

Twelve easy-to-implement ideas and instructions for theme gardens that parents and kids can grow together.

"Great Gardens For Kids" by Clare Matthews and Clive Nichols

Fifty illustrated projects to help pull children away from the TV and into the yard. Projects include ways to make the garden an imaginative place for play.

"Gardening With Children" by Beth Richardson

Creative ways to make kids successful with plants without overwhelming them.

"Gardening Wizardry For Kids" by L. Patricia Kite

More than 300 projects with seeds and anything else that grows.

"Kids Container Gardening" by Cindy Krezel

Get your children involved in your gardening activities with these 18 simple and fun container gardening projects.