



# Shaping your retail team

Here's what to look for when hiring front line garden center workers

From left: Ryan Bigej, Annie Ruef, and Mark Bigej showcase a section at Al's Garden & Home in Sherwood, Oregon. PHOTO COURTESY AIS GARDEN & HOME

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

**T**HE PANDEMIC MAY HAVE GROWN 16 million new gardeners. But for garden centers, gardening's spike in popularity also raised the level of competition, from large-scale retailers to pop-up propagators on Etsy.

What has historically set independent garden stores apart is service — and it's even more critical today as customers seek transparency and connection. Here's how some successful garden centers are finding and keeping staff to knit a culture that customers adore.

### People skills come first

With seasonal hiring, it's important to make the right hiring choices fast to have time to train your team up for the busy spring and/or holiday seasons.



**"... We are looking first and foremost for people who like people and are great at communicating"**

— Mark Bigej, part owner, Al's Garden & Home

In interviews with sources for this story, people skills topped the list as the most sought-after attribute for new retail employees.

At Moltbak's Garden and Home in Woodinville, Washington, with about 75 retail employees, Store Operations Manager Matt Porter has switched his focus since he started 15 years ago.

"I think the knowledge I need now is different than 10 years ago," he said. "I used to look for a lot of [plant] knowledge. Now my baseline is enthusiastic, outgoing people who love gardening. I'm looking for people who are excited, who want to learn and share what they've learned."

Because so many people have a computer in their back pockets, customers may be looking for



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Leon Lonstein is one of the staff members at one of Bachman's six nurseries in Minnesota. The company begins hiring seasonal staff in March for an April start and aims to bring back as many experienced seasonal staff as possible. PHOTO COURTESY BACHMANS

community more than trusted advisors, although he is always thrilled to find new staffers with strong plant experience.

"On the retail end when we hire, we are looking first and foremost for people who like people and are great at communicating," said Mark Bigej, part owner and chief operating officer of **Al's Garden & Home**, a family-owned, third-generation business with four retail locations in Sherwood, Woodburn, Gresham and Wilsonville, Oregon. Across the four stores, he estimated Al's staff numbers close to 100.

So-called soft skills, he said, are "definitely harder to train" than procedures and plant care.

"What we've been finding lately is our sweet spot is people who have those interpersonal skills and love gardening," he said. "They don't have to be plant experts."

Al's hires "people, not paper," said Brian Kriesel, director of retail stores.

At Bachman's, a Minnesota-based chain of six garden centers that also includes several in-store shops in the area, they begin hiring seasonal employees, which make up approximately 65% of the

staff, in March for an April start.

"It is our goal to bring back as many experienced seasonal team members as possible," said Sherri Eriksrud, vice president of retail operation. "This helps with quick onboarding and provides us with a workforce of people already trained in standard operating procedures and product knowledge."

In fact, Bachman's has one employee who just celebrated 50 years at the company, and several more at the 45-year-mark.

Eriksrud says Bachman's is seeing fewer applicants with deep plant knowledge, but she's more concerned about customer service skills. And each store has horticulturists or Master Gardeners ready for complex questions.

Bigej said the hiring process has changed in recent years. "We are leaning much heavier on social media, saying 'Text to apply' much more than emails," he says.

If someone is more introverted, they may be better suited to a less public-facing position in ordering, administration, or plant care.

### Knowing, communicating your values

Creating a positive, sustaining culture of teamwork is a combination of understanding and translating into policy both the company's values and the unique benefits it offers its customers.

Bachman's "core focus" is "We bring beauty to life," which offers a framework for training, priorities and decision-making.

"Whenever a customer returns to the store and asks for a team member by name, I know we have made the kind of connection that really makes a difference, Eriksrud said. "We have a team member in one of our locations who received four hand-written customer comment notes last year."

"I think my whole job is creating a team," said Porter. "Once you have that, training is really easy."

### Spring training is for retail too

In training, the onboarding process is key at Molbak's, which welcomes new employees with a gift, a group orientation with pizza and role-playing. Porter said staff are trained to work multiple roles and encouraged to switch departments.



Zoreh Jamjoo puts together a display at Al's Garden & Home in Sherwood. PHOTO COURTESY ALS GARDEN & HOME

Understanding other people's jobs makes it easier to support them, he notes.

For Al's Garden & Home, "Training starts on day one — we have an extensive process working in partnership with our store leaders," said Kriesel.

Al's has a customer service program called "Seeds of Knowledge" that everyone takes. "When it's time to go live, we've created a buddy system where new employees shadow an experienced employee," Kriesel said. "They're encouraged to ask questions, and we've found that to be really effective."

Bachman's offers refresher training for returning seasonal employees, and more in-depth training for new staff, customized to position.

For instance, garden sales team members receive a catalog of plant offerings, organized by customer need, such as drought-tolerance or deer resistance. A company-wide "garden kick-off" meet-

ing opens the garden season, covering new products, vendor demonstrations, and safety protocols. They also employ a buddy system for the first shift.

#### Being word-of-mouth worthy

Customer service consultant Anne Obarski of Merchandise Concepts said that if you want to build an engaged team of customer service wizards, the same rules apply to any size garden center — even a small mom-and-pop operation.

The goal, she said, is to make the business "contagious on purpose," to the point where customers are telling their friends all about the great experience they had.

You get one chance, she said, to make a customer fall for you, starting with greeting them and finding out their needs that day. Almost worse than not finding any employee to help you is finding one that ignores you or that is uninterested in your questions. >>>

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Each successful business or garden center has what she calls its “pink pig” — the unforgettable something that sets it apart. Having that clearly in mind keeps the team on-message with every interaction.

For Al’s, it’s the nearly 75 years of family-owned service in the community. Obarski cited Groovy Plants Ranch in Marengo, Ohio, which offers a kids play area centered around a Volkswagen Beetle and a dirt bar potting area, but you might bring in rare plants, a food truck, chef demonstrations, or Master Gardener visits.

Employees should be able to engage the customer, identify their needs, and make the sale while ensuring the customer will be successful with their purchase. They also need, Obarski said, to be able to say “in a nanosecond” what the features and benefits of the business and products are for the customer. For instance, when asked why this mugo pine costs more than at the nearest box store, the employee might

explain that it’s grown locally (or on-site) and let the customer know they can come back with questions or issues.

### Communication

Molbak’s keeps staff informed with monthly meetings, weekly “FYI” emails and twice-daily “huddles” for on-the-ground news. The FYIs might include sales goals, duty rosters, tips on new products, or reminders about staying hydrated in the August heat.

Al’s sends out a monthly PowerPoint highlighting the upcoming season. “It’s not only information, but inspiration,” Bigej said.

### Engage, acknowledge employees

Attracting engaged employees starts with competitive wages. Since the pandemic, Molbak’s has raised its wages to compensate for the local cost of living and commuting, even though it meant hiring fewer people and asking staff to multitask.

It streamlined the company structure to enable people to work across departments.

For example, instead of being two distinct departments, “live goods” employees merge into the “home department” during the winter months.

Another key element is motivation, Obarski said. “The trend is, ‘If I don’t feel worthwhile and that I am making the company a better place, I’ll work somewhere else.’” She references a recent study by Investopedia indicating 1 in 4 employees surveyed are actively looking for work. As a result, she said, “You better have the ability to train, educate and motivate the employees who are working for you.”

Obarski recommends empowering employees with new responsibility, like asking them to merch the seeds, or take charge of the vegetable displays, ideally with targeted goals and accountability. You can offer rewards, like a percentage or commission on sales. “Then they feel they have some skin in the game,” she said.

She also recommends regular employee reviews, even if they are just check-ins versus performance evaluations.

Molbak’s holds staff appreciation events throughout the year. “We’ll bring a food truck in and wear fun clothes that day, and I’ll write a card to all my employees telling them why I appreciate them,” Porter said.

Likewise, Al’s Garden & Home staff comes out for summer potlucks and barbecues, and an annual January meeting to plot out the year ahead. Bigej said he also encourages the staff to have fun on the job.

With a team that is engaged in the work and supporting each other, everything works more smoothly. One husband-and-wife team Obarski consulted with years ago reported gleefully after implementing some of these customer service and hiring tips: “My wife and I were able to go on vacation for three weeks because we had people trained in the right seats, within our company, and it went perfectly.” ☺

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