

# The power of loyalty



Al's Garden & Home offers a multi-pronged approach — a rewards program teamed up with limited-time Color Dollars. Along with a 2% rebate on purchases and earning a point for every dollar spent, the rewards program delivers exclusive sales on Member Reward Days. PHOTOS COURTESY OF AL'S GARDEN & HOME

## Successful retail nursery rewards programs keep gardeners coming back for more

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

**W**hen gardeners plan their gardens, you as the retail nursery operator want to be their first stop. A well-designed loyalty program can turn casual visits into repeat business, building trust and goodwill that lasts well beyond the first purchase.

### Cultivating loyalty

Loyalty programs do more than hand out discounts — they help shape habits, educate customers and grow enduring relationships.

This is important. Research shows it can cost anywhere from 5–25 times more to attract a new customer than to keep an existing one. Even a small increase in customer retention — just 5% — can translate into a roughly 25% boost in profits.

The best part? Loyalty members don't just stick around. They also spend more, generating 12–18% more revenue annually than shoppers who aren't enrolled. That >>



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Johnson Brothers Garden Market in Eugene, Oregon, offers two avenues of rewards: a year-round rewards point program implemented digitally via Square Loyalty software, and seasonal paper Brothers Bucks. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHNSON BROTHERS GARDEN MARKET

combination of habit, trust, and added value keeps gardeners coming back year after year.

Loyalty programs hone in on your most engaged customers, allowing you to save money on advertising. Instead of broadcasting coupon mailers to the county, loyalty programs leverage the 80/20 rule — that 80% of your business will come from 20% of your customers.

Mark Bigej co-owns **Al's Garden & Home**, a 75-year-old Oregon retail nursery with four locations — and a well-established loyalty program that boasts 55,000 members. “80% of our sales volume comes from Garden Rewards customers,” he said.

As a bonus, tracking of customer behavior can highlight demographics and purchasing trends. These can inform the retailer's future purchase decisions and strategy.

### Keeping it simple: tradition that delivers

All the nurseries we spoke to believed strongly in the value of their

loyalty programs.

At **Johnson Brothers Garden Market** in Eugene, Oregon — which is celebrating 40 years in business — co-owner Katie Johnson says her father-in law, founder Vern Johnson, first implemented a loyalty program about 30 years ago.

Operating on five acres, the garden center offers two avenues of rewards: a year-round rewards point program implemented digitally via Square Loyalty software, and seasonal paper Brothers Bucks.

With the Square program, Johnson said, “Customers automatically get points when they shop with us. These points never expire and can be used on anything (once they receive enough points to redeem). Customers earn 1 point for every dollar spent and, when they have



100 points, they earn a \$5 discount on any purchase. With Square Loyalty, the customer sets up their information at checkout on their screen. Once they have enough points, the program prompts them and asks if they want to use them.”

Offering both paper and digital systems helps bridge generations and expand reach. “Customers of older generations really love our Brother Bucks. In contrast, our younger shoppers prefer the Reward Points system. They appreciate not having to keep track of paper coupons. Some of our customers love both!”

Likewise, Al’s Garden & Home offers a multi-pronged approach — a rewards program teamed up with limited-time Color Dollars. Along with a 2% rebate on purchases and earning a point for every dollar spent, the rewards program delivers exclusive sales on Member Reward Days. Points expire one year after accrual.

In 2024, Justin Read took over ownership of **Garland Nursery** (Corvallis, Oregon), which offers a Garden Club membership program. “Having a loyalty program keeps customers engaged and helps drive sales and creates a sense of community for the customer,” he said.

In addition to reaping \$5 Rewards Dollars for every 200 points earned through purchases, the program tracks purchases and gives members access to members-only events and sale previews. Points don’t expire, but reward dollars do at the end of the calendar year.

Fairview Greenhouses & Garden Center in Raleigh, North Carolina modernized from a paper system to a digital app that rewards visits via on-site QR code scanning, offering plant care tips and purchase tracking too. The company plans to integrate purchase rewards soon, marketing director Heather Rollins said.

By downloading the app, a customer earns \$5. After 10 visits, they earn a \$25 gift card to go with Bronze status, and after 49 visits, they earn Platinum status and a \$100 gift card. “This structure keeps customers engaged throughout the year and fosters long-term loyalty,” said Rollins.

While the program has 6,461 users, Rollins said 576 have reached Bronze

## KEYS TO LOYALTY PROGRAMS

- **Keep it simple.** “Come up with one simple program and stick to it, said Johnson. “Don’t make a lot of changes and make sure all employees really understand it.”
- **Communicate clearly and regularly.** Transparency and clarity help build trust.
- **Make the reward useful to the customer.** Whether its seasonal sales, easy communication, or flexible spending systems, find ways to reward your customer that work for you both.

level or above. “Our *Silver, Gold, and Platinum* members are easily our most loyal and engaged customers,” Rollins said. “They not only visit more often and make larger purchases year over year, but they’ve also become incredible ambassadors for Fairview — sharing their positive experiences and encouraging friends and neighbors to shop with us.”

Rollins noted that focusing communications through the app meant phasing out seasonal promotions, but the trade-off has been worthwhile given the app’s engagement.

An added benefit is app-enabled customer outreach. “The app allows us to send push notifications, which have become one of our most effective marketing tools,” she said. “We can quickly promote sales, events, and new arrivals directly to our customers’ phones.”

While digital systems offer advantages, Rollins noted challenges, including occasional slow internet speeds at the register. It’s also a battle to encourage older customers to adopt the app, though positive social media feedback from younger users is helping bridge that gap.

Whether digital or paper, timing and creativity can make loyalty programs even more powerful.

## Time of the season

Beyond year-round programs, strategic seasonal promotions can drive traffic during slower periods.

Johnson Brothers doles out Brother Bucks business-card sized coupons >>



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offering \$10 off a purchase of \$20 or more. The catch? These are only available at certain times of year.

“We offer Summer Bucks that can be redeemed July 12–20, and Fall Brother Bucks that can be redeemed October 11–19,” Johnson said. “These can only be redeemed on full price items. We hand Summer Bucks from February–June and Fall Bucks from February–September. Customers receive one Brother Buck coupon (\$10 off \$20) for every \$100 they spend.”

Johnson Brothers discovered that creating buzz around an event heightened its impact. “We used to have the Brother Buck redemption period last a whole month. We found when we shortened the redemption period we created a sense of urgency, and more customers came out.”

Despite the administrative effort needed for Brother Bucks, the short-term boost is too valuable to abandon. “We

have discussed over the years retiring our Brother Buck program to simplify to the one Reward Program,” she said, “but it is such a nice bump in sales during the redemption period. We have our redemption period during typically slow times, so it really does help sales!”

One creative twist — during Fall Garden Day in October, customers have the chance to redeem not only *expired* Brother Bucks, but competitors’ as well!

“Customers love this,” Johnson said.

At Al’s Garden & Home, Color Dollars are available during prescribed weeks and can be used for up to 50% of a customer’s total purchase. During Garden Member Reward days, taking place on handful of long weekends across the year, there are additional incentives to come in and shop.

“We offer all Garden Rewards Members 20%-30% off all regular priced

merchandise in the store,” Bigej said. “The percentage off depends on the time of year and the year we are having. We adjust based on the gross margin we are achieving at the time and the need to drive customers into the store.”

The Color Dollars are given out to all customers (not just Garden Rewards Customers) with every purchase from January through September, at the rate of \$1 for every \$10 spent. They are redeemable specific dates in July and September. Al’s also offers Christmas Dollars. They are given out September through early December and redeemable mid-to-late December.

### What makes loyalty stick

Clear messaging and thoughtful evolution are key. Johnson noted that simplifying Brother Bucks wording over the years made a significant difference.

Five years ago, the company switched from a tiered Clutch-based rewards program to Square, eliminating manual point entry errors that plagued seasonal staff during busy periods.

“This was leading to major errors and issues for the customers, but mostly for our company,” she said. “Seasonal cashiers were often adding way more points to customers’ accounts and not redeeming the points correctly,”

Her advice? “Find a system that is driven by the customer and not the cashier.”

Above all, be mindful about making changes. Systems that are easy to use and genuinely rewarding create the kind of customer loyalty that sustains nurseries through every season. ©

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