After hours events can bring garden devotees to retailers



Hardy Plant Society of Oregon members shop at an After Hours program. PHOTO BY RUTH CLARK

Most businesses and garden centers are always on the lookout for new ideas to enhance their growth. Oftentimes, just visiting with other similar businesses can spark an idea.

Garden centers, in particular, need to be aware of what the latest garden trends are. Gardeners can be a fickle group, and plant trends can change from year to year. In addition to visiting other garden centers, if there is a large and active garden organization in your area, that could prove to be an excellent source of garden and plant trends.

In the Portland, Oregon, metro area, The Hardy Plant Society of Oregon (HPSO) is just such an organization. With more than 3,000 members that are, for the most part, avid gardeners, it behooves garden centers to be connected to this organization as well as other similar groups.

While the majority of members are in the Portland metro area, there is active participation from members as far north as Vancouver, Washington and as far south as Salem.



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Bringing in potential customers

HPSO offers its members multiple programs. One in particular has been created for social and garden center involvement. It is called the After Hours program. This program has been very well received by both the members and participating garden centers.

As the name implies, the After Hours program allows HPSO members to visit a garden center when it's closed to the general public. The event is free and for members only.

Both HPSO and the garden centers do have some responsibilities. HPSO is responsible for publicity, which is accomplished by sending newsletters and emails to members promoting the event. Members are encouraged to sign up electronically, and HPSO provides a registration table with name tags. The registration provides an approximate guest count, so the garden center can be prepared. Also, if there is something special for members, some garden centers require attendee name tags. »



HPSO members at an After Hours event at Little Prince of Oregon Nursery Inc. PHOTO BY RUTH CLARK

Garden centers must agree to a private time for the event when the business would normally be closed to the general public, and they must have adequate parking. They also have to offer a discount of some kind. This is usually between 10–25% off regular priced plants and/or general merchandise.

The garden center must provide some type of refreshments, which can be anything from bottled water and crackers to mini desserts, ice cream, or more.

This past season, **N&M Nursery** in Hubbard provided a Mexican food truck with tacos, beans, rice, salad and condiments. Beer and soft drinks were also available at no charge. As you can imagine, this was a huge success with attendees. People ate, talked, lingered and bought and bought and bought!

Co-owner Rosie Sullivan, with her husband Sean, wrote, "It is a great social event. We always get new people that have never been to our place before, and I love watching all the HPSO members socialize."

This is also an opportunity for attendees to perhaps meet the owners and the staff and ask questions. Or if the garden center is also a grower, a behind-the-scenes tour of the growing area might be an option.



HPSO members listen to a presentation on conifers at Al's Garden & Home during an After Hours program. PHOTO BY RUTH CLARK

Little Prince of Oregon Nursery Inc. is a wholesale grower. At their After Hours event, they offered a selection of plants for attendees to purchase. They also offered tours of their greenhouses, led by their professional growers. This was very well received because it was an opportunity that is not often available.

Also, this past season, several garden centers set aside an area with chairs and a stage for a presentation by someone renowned in their field. **Al's Garden & Home** in Sherwood, set up just such a

space and had a speaker give a presentation on conifers. Guests were offered special conifers for sale.

Peter Eastman, a tree and shrub buyer for Al's Garden & Home, said, " Events like this have been instrumental in bringing in new and returning customers to our stores throughout 2026."

The After Hours program has been very well received by garden centers because it can bring in a flush of customers in a short period of time. There is always the likelihood that some of these attendees have not visited this particular garden center and perhaps will become future customers.

Replicating the concept

While HPSO is a very active organization with a large membership base, this concept could certainly be carried over to other cities. The limiting criteria would be that it would probably have to be in a city or metro area with multiple independent garden centers. There would also need to be some organization that would be willing to do the organizing. The program is not so rigid that it couldn't be altered to fit the particular needs of a local area.

With any large organization, it can be difficult to provide a venue where members can meet and chat with other members in a relaxed setting. For most gardeners, it is hard to think of anything more relaxing than being in a garden center and looking and talking about plants and meeting and greeting other plant enthusiasts. After Hours provides such a much-needed venue.

The HPSO After Hours committee chairperson, Ruth Clark, writes, "The whole idea for the program is that we benefit the garden business by bringing them customers and exposure, while also benefiting our members with a social event and discounts."

Hopefully this After Hours idea can spread to other communities and be a successful way for garden centers to engage with the gardening public and for the gardeners to socialize with other gardeners and buy more plants!

Happy New Year!

