



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Renae Bobbett, Owner

Beaver Bark Gift & Garden Center, Richland, WA

Beaver Bark Dares To Be Different & Gets People Talking



Beaver Bark Gift & Garden Center, Richland, WA, is known for going over the top with its displays, whether it's a spider's nest with crawling spiders hanging from the 24-foot atrium at Halloween or a complete transformation of the retail space at Christmastime with Santa, elves and live reindeer. "What makes us different is our merchandising. We're not afraid to invest in props that get attention and make people talk," says Owner Renae Bobbett.

That talk leads to a word-of-mouth snowball effect for Beaver Bark, a destination garden center with green goods, landscaping materials, home decor, gifts, a cafe and more. "People tell their friends about us and bring them in. Anywhere I go in

town,

I hear people say we're their favorite store."

As a Garden Centers of America member, Renae gives GCA credit for the store's reputation as an area hotspot. "My garden center looks the way it does because I've been on so many GCA store tours," she says. "I've seen what works. I have a photo library from the tours that I refer back to often."

Talking with other garden center operators on the tours and at the GCA Membership Networking Lunch at the IGC Show play a big part in store's success, too, Renae says. "The networking, without a doubt, is the most valuable time spent," she says. "I can list a whole slew of contacts in the industry who I can call right now and say, 'I'm going through this – you've already been through this. How did you solve it?'" She continues, "I welcome people to call me, too. But that doesn't happen until you've built trust and rapport with someone, which the GCA tours have done for me."

"It's really important that you get a different perspective and see what other garden centers are doing. There is not a tour that I have been on where I haven't found something to bring back that I've profited from."



It was with this open and informed mind that Renae designed the garden center's 16,000-square-foot Deforche building. Opened in 2006, it features an atrium and a welcoming, shopper-friendly layout. "It's open and the lighting is bright, not florescent. There are meandering pathways," she says. Add a heated floor and a climate-controlled roof that opens and shuts, and the store has the right ingredients for a comfortable shopping experience. "During our winter months, it feels like paradise," says Renae. "It's a fabulous space."

On the Lookout for Trends

In addition to its buzz-worthy displays, Beaver Bark's selection of merchandise sets it apart. Half of its business is in gifts, from furniture and jewelry to clothing and artwork. Renae goes out of her way to fill her nursery and gift shop with something different for her Pacific Northwest customers. "We shop at the IGC Show and back east more than on the West Coast. We try to stay really unique," she says. "I have paid for every single trip we've taken to the IGC Show from the things we've found there."

One of the finds from last summer's show, an 8-foot gorilla statue from Design Toscano, just arrived at Beaver Bark. Renae is generating social media buzz with the big guy now. "We've made him a photo op, so when people take a picture and tag it on Facebook, it generates advertising for our store," she says. "You can't buy that kind of advertising."

While maintaining an active Facebook page, Renae continues to see the value in direct mail targeting customers ages 35 and older. She publishes and distributes The Good Life magazine three times a year to inform customers of store events like Girls Night Out, to show them what plants and other merchandise are in for the season, and to provide recipes and planting advice. She says the investment is worth it. "I watch people come in with their magazines, and pages are highlighted and folded over to mark the things they're coming to buy," she says.

Last year's spring issue brought together plants and fashion by showing customers how the colors in their garden should be updated, much like their wardrobe. Colorful photos of blooming plants were coupled with a fashion sketch of the same color. It's just one more way Beaver Bark maintains its fashion-forward presence. "Fashion is a part of what makes us different," says Renae. "It's all around us, from the colors of the cars people drive to the colors they paint their houses, and customers want those colors when they come in to shop for their homes." She continues, "We've always been able to be ahead of the trends, and it's because we're looking."

