



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Kaitlyn Larson, Owner, Larson's Garden Center, Burlington, CT

Larson's New Location Takes Century-Old Business in a Fresh Direction



A new store for Larson's Garden Center in Burlington, CT, is opening the door for GCA Member Kaitlyn Larson to apply her fresh perspectives as a fourth generation owner while building on what's worked at her family's garden center during its 95 years in business. "We have a brand new facility, and we're incorporating the ideas from when my father ran the old store, implementing what worked well there," says Larson, 27, who took over the business five years ago at the age of 22.

In addition to calling on the wisdom of her predecessors, Kaitlyn puts her stamp on the garden center's new location by retailing outside the box. "Our spunky way of looking at things makes us unique," she says. "A lot of garden centers use neutral colors and have more of a country atmosphere. Our store, on the other hand, is bright and vibrant, making customers smile every time they turn around – and that's what it's all about."

Kaitlyn finds smile-worthy merchandising strategies by getting out to other garden centers to see what's working - and isn't working - for their stores. "We've toured the entire country, stopping at different garden centers," she says, including during GCA's Summer Tours. "We've taken a lot of that research, bringing those fresh ideas together in one spot, our own store."

Garden Centers of America is a consistent source of inspiration. "I enjoy the trends e-mails," Kaitlyn says. "And my family loves going on the GCA Summer Tours, seeing all the new things that are going on. We're still going through the pictures from last summer's tour, and we're getting ideas for the season ahead."

Fitting In Food

One of the ideas Kaitlyn researched and will put in place at Larson's new store this spring is the addition of a cafe that serves ice cream and other good eats. "If I didn't own my own business, I may have been a chef," she says. "I've always had a connection with that industry, and I've worked in a lot of restaurants."

Offering ice cream is another calculated move that falls in line with Larson's fun atmosphere. "There's a high margin in ice cream, and it's a good draw – when we're slowing down in the summer, that's when ice cream sales pick up. It just makes sense."



Larson's will round out the food offerings with a grocery area located in a dedicated section of its 8,500-square-foot greenhouse. Kaitlyn plans to sell only all-natural foods, most sourced locally, to give customers who want to avoid processed foods the comfort of knowing everything in the store is fit for their shopping lists.

"I'm anticipating having as much local produce as possible, and specialty food items like sauces and spices," she says. "I want everything to be as natural as possible, so no high fructose corn syrup or aspartame – kind of like the Whole Foods concept, where you can go in and know that what you're going to get is a better-quality, more healthy product."

Standing Out

Another area where Kaitlyn is making her mark on the family business is with custom containers for area businesses and residences. She meets with clients for a design consultation and fits her creations to meet their needs. "It's started to become a very profitable part of our landscape division. We're definitely pushing it this year," Kaitlyn says. "I work with restaurants and storefronts – I plant up their containers, and they maintain them. Then I switch them several times during the year."



She promotes this service at the garden center's website, where she features photos of her custom designs. "It's an easy job for me," she says. "I like being artistic, so it's a great outlet for that, and it brings in money for us. It's become a pretty nice category."

Other categories for Larson's include a full range of green goods, plus statuary, fountains, pottery, soils, mulches and more. There isn't too much in the way of home decor and gifts - Larson's focuses on beautifying outdoor spaces.



To stand out from its competitors, the garden center will offer specialty hydrangeas and hard-to-find shade plants this season. "We're still testing the market to see in which direction we want to go. But we're looking to be the place that has unique things," Kaitlyn says.

She is also working to make a name for Larson's by getting involved in local organizations and community outreach. "My fiancé and I are both members of our local fire department – and they're right across the street from us – so we've connected with a lot of people through that," she says. "I'm also the treasurer of the local garden club, and any time there's an opportunity to help donate or do anything the community needs in the way of plants, we try to do what we can to help."