



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Richard Ortega, Managing Partner

Nick's Garden Center & Farm Market, Aurora, CO

Nick's Garden Center Relies On Fun In-Store Customer Experiences to Navigate the Business Into the Future



Celebrating its 30th year in business, Nick's Garden Center & Farm Market has continued to be the go-to source for any gardening and landscaping needs for residents living in the Aurora, CO, area. As the 10-acre retailer heads into the future, the family leaders at the helm are implementing efforts that shift the focus from just what products they sell to what value they can add to customers' lives through fun, unique in-store experiences.

Like many independent garden centers throughout the country, Nick's is a family-run business. Nick Ortega Jr. and his son Randy Sr. opened the garden center in 1987. Nick's other son Richard would help out around the store while he was in high school, working on the weekends. *(Pictured above, from left to right: Bert Gallegos, Randy Ortega Sr., Randy Ortega Jr. and Richard Ortega.)*

After he graduated college in 1994, Richard joined his father and brother in the business full time. Now, the two brothers are Managing Partners. "I always had a passion for the business," Richard says.



As the retail landscape continues to evolve throughout the years, so does Nick's, which is starting to expand its portfolio beyond gardening and landscaping offerings to deliver that exceptional in-store experience that customers crave.

An on-site cafe, called Nick's Café, was added to the property four years ago. Not only does it

provide an additional revenue stream, it also increases foot traffic, especially during slower months. "Shoppers tend to browse longer, therefore increasing the average dollar transaction," Richard says.



The retailer is currently in the process of revamping the store website to make it easier for Millennials and Gen Z consumers to navigate it and get the information they need to complete their gardening projects. The younger generations of shoppers especially demand a unique in-store experience from retailers these days. They also expect to communicate with brands over social media, so that's why Nick's has increased its marketing budget to advertise more on Facebook and other social media platforms.



Consumers love to shop with retailers that invest in the local community - it's the right thing to do, and the act of giving back resonates with customers. It signifies that the store cares about the community and wants to see it flourish.

Nick's increased its community outreach and support of local organizations, such as the Garden Centers of Colorado and Colorado Nursery & Greenhouse Association, to really show its customers how much it cares about the success of the area.

The IGC retailer is also part of another community - Garden Centers of America (GCA) - where it networks with other indie garden centers and discovers new ideas and strategies from the GCA Summer Tours. Everything contributes to improving the in-store customer experience and the business altogether.

"What I always take away from these visits to other garden centers is the way I get inspired and motivated," Richard says. "Sometimes we tend to get complacent by being at our store most of the time. Whether it's discussing problems that other owners are facing or sharing ideas, it's that networking aspect that makes our business better and stronger."

GCA is not only one of Richard's go-to sources for networking, but his window into what else is happening in garden retailing. "There are many benefits of being a GCA member," he says. "GCA provides a 'pulse' on the industry."

Aiming to Entertain & Inspire

There's always something happening at Nick's - the range of events keeps customers coming back for more and creates an entertaining in-store experience.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are sold every day from mid-June through the end of October at the store's Farm Market. There are two seasonal events that are the highlights of the year and well attended: Green Chile Fest and Fall Fest.

The Green Chile Fest takes place on a weekend in mid-September, when Nick's roasts and sells approximately 400 bushels of green chiles. Cooking demonstrations, live music and garden vendors giving out samples rounds out the customer-favorite event. There's even a green chile, or "chile verde," contest where customers can enter their homemade recipes for a cash prize and a spot in Nick's "Hall of Flame."



Fall Fest kicks off the first weekend in October, entertaining customers with the annual "Giant Pumpkin Weigh-Off" contest, straw mazes, tractor rides through a haunted tunnel, jumping houses, pedal kart races, train rides around the store and more. The retailer does charge for these attractions. The Fall Fest is a big hit with children, drawing in many pre-school and kindergarten classes on field trips.



In addition to having a fun in-store experience, Nick's is known for its large selection of product, quality plants and great customer service, according to Richard.

"We empower our staff to take care of the customer first and foremost," he says. "Our ambiance is also special. We are here to inspire!"