



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Jennifer Wannemaker, General Manager

Wannemaker's Home & Garden, Downers Grove, IL

Wannemaker's Third-Generation Leadership Makes a Great Team



Entering its third generation of family leaders, Wannemaker's Home & Garden has served customers in the West suburbs of Chicago for 50 years, offering green goods, pottery, gifts, patio furniture, gardening supplies and more. The retailer's site was originally built as a hardware store before transitioning to a home and garden center, so the main building is large and expansive. A 15,000-square-foot retail greenhouse was added to the property later on to expand Wannemaker's garden offerings.

Jennifer Wannemaker and her siblings Kristen, Joe and Kelly (pictured, from left: Jennifer, Joe, Kristen and Jim Wannemaker) all left their corporate jobs about five years ago to run their family's business full-time with their father, Jim Wannemaker, after their uncle, Bob Wannemaker, decided to retire. While they collaborate on some aspects of the business, each sibling oversees certain departments of the store.

Jennifer manages the greenhouse, green goods and gift departments; Kristen is the store's bookkeeper and oversees the patio department; Joe manages all of the deliveries, warehouse, seasonal departments and sales of bath vanities; Kelly is in charge of data entry, inventory and marketing.

"We make a really good team," Jennifer says.



Growing up, Jennifer and her siblings helped out their dad and uncle at the store, working as

cashiers, watering plants and unloading trucks.

After high school, Jennifer and the other Wannemaker children attended college and earned business degrees. "When the opportunity came for my uncle to discuss retirement, my dad approached us and said, 'Hey, do you guys have any interest in doing it?'" she says. "I think it was always there, we were just waiting for the right opportunity. We had a family meeting one day, and we said, 'Hey, let's give this a shot.' It's been fun."

When it comes to differentiating their brand and finding new ideas and inspiration for the store, they tackle it as a team. Jennifer and Kelly, along with their parents, attended last year's GCA Summer Tour to Portland, OR, where they enjoyed experiencing IGC retailing in a different part of the country. "I think the IGC industry is really unique, because no two stores are the same," Jennifer says.

Since Wannemaker's has such a large retail building, Jennifer says it's hard for them to emulate a cozy shopping experience, like what they explored on the tour. "We really enjoyed seeing and meandering through the more quaint garden centers," she says. "We did get some new ideas of how we could better work a display garden into our nursery, because it is just a large concrete area right now. It's hard to make it look warm and welcoming, like someone's yard."

Meeting other independent garden center owners and managers in the industry and exchanging ideas are some of the biggest benefits of being a member in GCA, according to Jennifer.

"It was fun to meet and talk to people from all over the country about what they're involved in, what has worked for us and what new ideas we have," she says. "It was our first tour, and we would definitely do it again."

She continues, "You learn so much, even while you're on the buses driving around between the stops. We asked a couple on the tour, 'We're struggling to find a good supplier for this product, do you have any suggestions?' We came home with notes and phone numbers of different vendors for product that we were looking for."

In Jennifer's past work in the corporate realm, she's never experienced such a sense of camaraderie between businesses. "That's what is really neat about the garden center industry – everybody bands together and is willing to share ideas," she says. "Coming from the corporate world, it was refreshing to see that, because it's a totally different feel. It is special."

'It's just a feel-good place'

Beyond the usual garden center staples, Wannemaker's carries high-end patio furniture, unique gifts and unusual items that customers don't see everywhere else. Since the store still has its former hardware warehouse, the retailer has the ability – and the space – to order and



store large volumes of product.



It's that very selection of product, as well as top-notch customer service, that sets Wannemaker's apart from the competition. Jennifer says they have to differentiate themselves since they have big boxes very close to their location.

"Our customers come in, and they know our employees," Jennifer says. "They know the quality and the information they're going to get. People just enjoy coming in and talking to our staff."

Wannemaker's differentiates its store by creating over-the-top displays that inspire customers with ideas they've never seen before. "We have a lot of customers who come in to get ideas," she says. "We try to give them ideas that they can not only recreate at home, but that are different and unusual."

Jennifer credits her staff for constantly coming up with creative ideas that are unique and interesting to customers. Her designers take advantage of the main building's high ceilings, displaying product high on the walls and making an impression with shoppers.

Since Jennifer and her siblings are Millennials, they understand that their generation shops differently from how their parents and previous generations did. They consciously make an effort to communicate to Millennial consumers through social media, keeping in mind that having an online presence is extremely important.

"We find ways for our customers to get involved and get it out to them through Facebook and e-newsletters, which helps draw in a different clientele," Jennifer says. "We still have the same customers who have lived in the area for a long time, and we still do advertise in our local newspaper, but we're drawing on different media outlets to get people aware that we're here."



They're also starting to host more events, such as a garden show in the spring and a Christmas open house later in the year, to attract more Millennials and young families to Wannemaker's.

She says, "It's just a feel-good place. It's happy."

