



BRANCHING OUT

Niches to Help You Grow Your Lawn and Garden Business

Are you looking for ways to spice up the lawn and garden department? Then consider unique products and services you can add to help distinguish your store from the competition.

In order to keep lawn and garden enthusiasts coming back to shop, you should explore unique niches beyond the basics.

In this article, *Hardware Retailing* will highlight four different trends retailers have added to their lawn and garden departments to provide a specialized service and keep customers happy and engaged.

On the following pages, you'll learn about a store that has taken the fairy garden trend to new heights; see how DIY ponds and pond supplies can add more foot traffic; discover a business that gives customers a different way to garden through hydroponics; and see how a landscaping service can add to the bottom line.

Honey, I Shrunk the Garden

"Fairy gardens," also known as "miniature gardens," have picked up speed over the past few years, and many retailers are giving the niche a try. So what are they? Gardeners take, in miniature, all of the elements of a yard, including plants, a tiny model home and landscaping materials such as mulch, to depict a real yard inside a whiskey barrel, pot or other container.

For the past seven years, Hartville Hardware in Hartville, Ohio, has built upon this growing trend.

Testing Out a Whimsical Garden Trend

When Steve McMillen, manager of Hartville Hardware's outdoor living department, first proposed selling fairy gardens, he said the staff was skeptical. The niche started with only 3 or 4 feet of space and today, it takes up 20 feet.

“When I first decided to add fairy gardening products, I thought it was just a cute niche people might like, and I figured we would ride it until it burned out,” McMillen says. “I never expected it to be going strong seven years later.”

Whether customers are creating their first fairy gardens or simply searching for new items to add to the ones they’ve already designed, the category delivers in sales, he says.

“Even though it’s miniature pieces, they do add up quickly. A customer might buy a house, a fairy and a mini-lawnchair set today, and next week, they might come back to buy a miniature grill or start another garden. It’s really kind of fascinating,” McMillen says.

The store devotes the most space to the niche in the busy lawn and garden months, but the best part about fairy gardens is that they can be created and maintained year-round, McMillen says.

“We keep our fairy garden items out all year. However, in the winter, we consolidate it from 20 feet to about 8 feet of space,” he says. “We add winter wonderland-themed items and even sell Santa Claus figurines, reindeer and more. People can have them outside in the warm months and then move them indoors in the winter.”

Items customers may purchase to create a fairy garden include objects that are made specifically for the small-garden scene, like small stepping stones, chairs, fences, water and lighting features and miniature plants.

Successfully Sell the Fairy Garden Niche

Retailers who decide to try their hand at selling the fairy garden niche should start by creating a few miniature gardens to display and have an employee or two to take charge of the niche, McMillen says.

To help a customer visualize the tiny, whimsical landscape they can create, and to draw them in to the category, Hartville Hardware has a few fairy gardens on display that employees designed and made with products from the store.



Hartville Hardware employees design fairy gardens with products stocked to intrigue customers and spark inspiration.



When Outdoor Living Manager **Steve McMillen** introduced fairy gardening seven years ago, he didn't think it would become such a strong category at **Hartville Hardware**.

"We've made up some fairy gardens here to show people what they can do," he says. "You can take a broken clay pot and make one in that. We've made them in wagons and even birdbaths. The possibilities are endless."

What has made the category successful at the store has been identifying an employee who is interested in the niche and who can answer questions and help customers design their own fairy gardens.

"We have one employee who designs our store fairy gardens and helps customers come up with a design. I think of her as my go-to person for fairy gardens," McMillen says.

Although having an employee dedicated to the niche isn't necessary, it does help customers brainstorm and find fun ways to start or improve their miniature gardens—all making the category easier to sell, he says.

In addition to creating visually appealing displays and training your employees to help customers find items for their own gardens, McMillen says those who want to find success in the category shouldn't just pick up a few SKUs.

"Honestly, you've got to get in deep," he says. "If you just add 10 items in the category, you won't give your customers enough options. By having a wide selection of items, your customers will know you're truly in the fairy garden business."

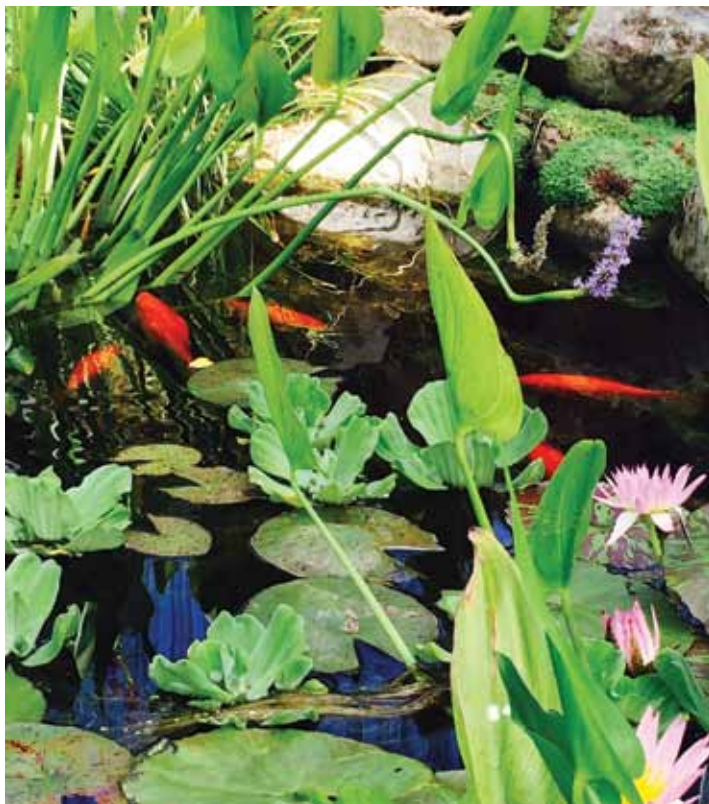
To get our hands dirty and try out the popular trend, *Hardware Retailing* editors went to a local hardware store to pick up items to create an office fairy garden. Flip to Page 86 to see a visual, step-by-step guide of our fairy garden project and gain inspiration for your store's own fairy garden display.

Ready, Set, Go Fish!

When a family heads to Johnson's Home & Garden in Maple Valley, Washington, the kids often beg to visit one special feature of the store—the indoor pond located in the greenhouse.

Johnson's Home & Garden has had an indoor pond since 2014, and the response from customers and their families has been huge, according to Doug Kelly, nursery manager at the store.

"Almost every kid and adult who comes to the store wants to come look at the pond and see the fish in our greenhouse," Kelly says. "It's been a huge draw for business."



In the greenhouse at **Johnson's Home & Garden**, customers of all ages are excited to stop by the pond and look at the fish.

Make a Splash With DIY Ponds

Back in 2013, Johnson's Home & Garden relocated into a new, 25,000-square-foot building. One week after the store opened, Kelly, a retiree who used to own and operate his own nursery, joined the team.

"After I came to work at Johnson's Home & Garden, I learned they wanted to add a pond. I encouraged them to make it bigger than they originally intended, because a bigger pond makes a bigger impression on curious customers. They agreed to go bigger, and my son constructed the pond and had it up and running by January of 2014."

Having sold both outdoor and indoor pond projects in the past, Kelly has a wealth of knowledge that he is able to share with customers when they decide to test the waters.

"At the store, we offer a type of pond that is very easy to install," Kelly says. "For a customer to create a pond that is perhaps 8 by 11 feet, the project typically includes a pond kit, rocks, lights and plants, and it is usually about \$2,000."

To really see big interest in the category, retailers need to have a pond on site, Kelly says. Installing one is an investment, but it can pay off in the long run, he says.

“We’re trying to establish a solid pond business at the store,” he says. “It’s an expense to get it set up, and inventory in the pond category is expensive, but once your customers and those interested in ponds know you have the items they need, the word spreads quickly.”

In the time the store has been selling products in this niche, which includes pond materials, maintenance and tools, sales have increased about 30 percent year-over-year, Kelly says.

Another perk to selling the unique pond and pond accessory niche is that competition is usually not right next door. The nearest competitor to Johnson’s Home & Garden is about 20 miles or farther away, so once customers realize the store has what they need, they don’t drive elsewhere for products and materials, Kelly says.

DIY Project Leads to a Tranquil Escape

Installing a pond might be easier for some homeowners than others, but Kelly is able to assist interested customers by helping them plan out their own ponds with his knowledge and expertise.

“I don’t provide specific training on how to install a pond, but I help customers on a more one-on-one basis,” he says. “Everybody’s pond is different, so I talk with them and help them decide

what they need. If we don’t have something in stock, I can usually get it ordered and to the store in about a week.

“In order to succeed in this category, it’s important to have someone available to really help with product knowledge,” Kelly says. “Plus, if you have room for it, add a pond to the store. When customers can actually see it, they spend time visiting the pond and watching the waterfall.”



In addition to picking up the products to create a pond, customers browsing **Johnson’s Home & Garden** can also find plants to add to ponds.



If your business sells the products to create a pond, **Doug Kelly** says having a wide assortment of pond accessories is key for repeat customers.

Kelly often helps customers think through what they need to create their ponds, walking them through the steps of digging out the desired depth, adding in plants, installing the water filtration mechanism and then selecting the plants and other products they may need to keep the pond clean and maintained.

The store sold fish for a while and may return to selling them again soon. According to Kelly, adding goldfish or koi fish adds an extra element to any pond.

Kelly has his own garden pond at home, and once it was designed and installed, it became easy to maintain and extremely enjoyable, he says.

“I have a small pond at home that turns into a 15-foot stream which goes into a larger pond,” he says. “I enjoy sitting on my patio with a cup of coffee, listening to the water and watching the fish swim around.

“I try to check the skimmers, which remove unwanted debris from the surface of the pond, every week, but otherwise, it takes care of itself,” he says. “About one day a year I devote to cleaning the pond.”

Whether having a pond outside or inside, Kelly says it’s a great project for homeowners and can be enjoyed all year.

You can download a PDF of 10 helpful tips and tricks to install or maintain a pond, and share with your staff and customers. Download the guide at TheRedT.com/DIY-Ponds.

Planting Without the Soil

After learning about people trying hydroponic gardening in California and Texas, Max Chenevert, vice president of Vernon's Hardware in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, decided to give the niche a try.

Hydroponics is the practice of growing plants with just water and nutrients and without soil and is often done indoors, but can also be done outdoors.

Growing plants hydroponically has many advantages for commercial growers and hobbyists. Growers save space, water and time, since no weeding is required. Additionally, pests and diseases are drastically reduced with hydroponic gardening, and plants can grow at a quicker pace. After hearing about hydroponics on the news and seeing how much it was growing in popularity out west, Chenevert wanted to get in on the action.

"I could see the trend growing, so I decided to give it a try and started off with a 4-foot display," Chenevert says. "I knew very little about hydroponics in the beginning, and now, about seven or eight years later, it's expanded to about a 100-foot display."



Max Chenevert of **Vernon's Hardware** decided to give the hydroponics category a try. The display is now about 100 feet.

Selling Hydroponic Gardening

Vernon's Hardware has always had a strong lawn and garden department, but as people began spending more money on organic foods and returned to gardening, Chenevert thought it might be a good time to try out hydroponics.

"We offer a wide selection so people know we are serious about hydroponics," he says.

According to Chenevert, he does his best to help answer customers' questions and lead them toward resources to learn more. He advises those interested in hydroponics to start out small.

"Growing plants through hydroponics doesn't take up as much space as traditional gardening, but this type of gardening requires a lot of attention," he says. "The gardener needs to have

time to check on the plants every day, making sure they have the right nutrients, and check the pH levels. I recommend people start small, and if they enjoy it, then go big. But it's important to figure it out before going all in with something like this."

Since the practice can get pricey, Chenevert also stresses that customers need to be fully informed about the fact that hydroponics is much more involved than traditional gardening.

Before selling them all of the products needed, he encourages customers to make sure they have a solid foundation and a working knowledge of the project.



When it comes to traditional gardening, the product mix at **Vernon's Hardware** includes organic products.

By keeping customers aware of this fact up front, you'll avoid customers taking on more than they can handle.

Category Knowledge Boosts Store Traffic

Because of his personal interest in hydroponic gardening, Chenevert has taught himself and his staff a lot about hydroponics, and in order to keep this category a success, his employees are able to gain experience with hydroponic gardening, thanks to the plants he has on display inside and outside the store.

"I teach our employees how to grow hydroponically at the store so they get hands-on knowledge and learn techniques to teach others," he says. "We have two indoor garden areas up front, and we have an outdoor garden behind our store. My employees learn to take care of the displays, and I try to teach them the things I know as time goes on. If I have an employee especially interested, I'll suggest different literature I've read that they can check out."

While many customers come to the store requesting help based off of a video they saw on YouTube, Chenevert says he typically prefers to find knowledge from more reliable sources.

As far as helping customers, Chenevert says he does what he can to help and offer tips, but he encourages them to do research on their own prior to investing. Before selling them all of the products needed, he encourages customers to make sure they have a solid foundation and a working knowledge of the project.



Vernon's Hardware even grows hydroponic plants on site, which allows employees to get firsthand experience.

“The customer has to have his or her own idea of what they want to do and needs at least a working knowledge of it,” he says. “Once they have an idea, I can try to help them fulfill that need.”

A customer interested in getting started will need something to check pH, a way to measure electrical conductivity of water, a hydroponic system to grow plants in, nutrients, indoor lights and ventilation. Some of the most common



When a customer decides to practice hydroponic gardening, they'll return to your business frequently for needed accessories.

plants grown are lettuce and tomatoes, and many people want to do cuttings or propagate, which is replicating their favorite plant, like a rose bush.

If They Can Dream It, You Can Landscape It

For nearly 30 years, Steve's Ace Home & Garden in Dubuque, Iowa, has been a destination for all things lawn and garden. Locals know they can find what they need at the store, including expert advice on landscaping.

According to Sara Carpenter, landscape designer and daughter of owners Steve and Judy Selchert, her mother had been helping customers create a game plan for their yards, even taking special trips to their homes to help them decide what they might want to invest in.

Now, they offer a landscape design service that has grown the client base and their lawn and garden sales.

Local Gardening Experts Build Customer Confidence

What started out as an owner helping a customer outside of work hours transformed into a landscape design service, which Carpenter says began about 16 or 17 years ago.

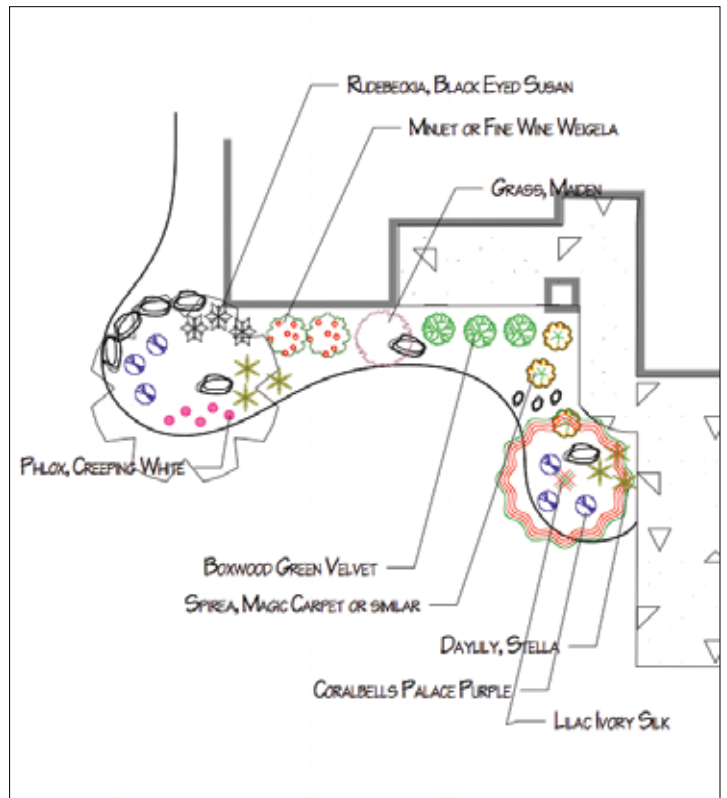
“We help them draw out the design and provide an estimate for the materials they need. Then, if they want it installed, we recommend local landscapers.”

—*Sara Carpenter, Steve's Ace Home & Garden*

The store now offers the service for a fee, which includes on-site visits to obtain measurements, a custom design based on a client's needs, an in-store presentation of design and referral to local landscape installers.

“We help them draw out the design and provide an estimate for the materials they need. Then, if they want it installed, we recommend local landscapers to do the job,” Carpenter says.

After following along with her mother on landscape design appointments as a child, Carpenter decided to study horticulture. After graduating, she returned to the store to work as



When **Sara Carpenter** of **Steve's Ace Home & Garden** helps a customer, she uses design software to draw out her landscape design plans.



The first thing landscape designers from **Steve's Ace Hardware & Garden** do when visiting a client's home is snap pictures of the home.

a landscape design expert. Having experts on their staff has built the business' credibility and its sales.

"It's great being the expert, but it also comes with a lot of responsibility," Carpenter says. "The more you help people, the more the word spreads, and you become the expert. We sell a ton of product through our landscape design services."

Providing a Detailed Sales Experience

In addition to helping create a landscape design outline and quote for a customer, Carpenter says they're able to sell more products like plants, soils and other items while helping local landscapers gain constant business by sending project requests their way.

If you do refer a customer to contractors, however, it's important to refer them to landscapers you trust. It's a good idea to vet potential landscapers prior to offering them jobs, because while they will manage that end of the job, a customer will still associate that landscaper with your business. Consider having clients fill out contractor reviews after the fact so you can stay on top of this information and only refer the best of the best.

"With the customer's permission, we forward the design to a list of contractors, and that group

fighters for that customer's business by giving them a competitive price," she says. "It's a win-win for the customer and local contractors. The customer gets to decide who will do the job, and the landscapers are able to stay busy. On top of that, we end up selling plant material without competing with local landscapers."

While the service is busiest during the spring, summer and fall, Carpenter says she and the other landscape designer stay busy in the winter as well.

"We are providing landscape design services all year round," she says. "When we're not able to go out and make detailed visits during the winter, there are other projects at the store we manage as well, usually related to the lawn and garden department."

Carpenter estimates she visits over 100 homes each year, as does her counterpart. They don't need to advertise the service, because feedback from happy clients spreads.

In addition, Carpenter is often asked to speak at different events to share her landscaping expertise.

"We spend no money advertising our services," she says.

"After my most recent speaking event, four people in attendance invited me to their homes," she says. "The speaking engagements I go to are free advertising."

When she's not helping a client decide on a landscape plan, Carpenter and the other landscape designer also offer another service called garden coaching.

"We go to people's homes and talk shop about their gardens. We show them how to care for plants, fine-tune their design and offer landscape maintenance," she says.

To best coach interested customers, Carpenter says she reads magazines, subscribes to blogs, and looks online at platforms like Houzz and Pinterest, in addition to participating in formal education and attending gardening trade shows, like the Independent Garden Show. ➡



Before starting each project, landscape designers from **Steve's Ace Hardware & Garden** create a mockup of the final product for customers to see.