

**W**alking through a local garden show, most consumers have no idea what effort goes into the exhibits by various landscape contractors. They say to themselves, "I paid four bucks to get into this commercial advertisement, so it better be good!"

Little do they realize the display set-up alone can come close to 250 hours. And, the cost of a display can range from \$1,000 to \$35,000.

Taking into consideration the time, money and hard work put into it, one might wonder if being in a garden show is worth it. Although the reasons for being in shows vary from landscape contractor to landscape contractor, most agree the event is a worthwhile one.

"The incentive for being in a garden show is just very simply the

hope of achieving some leads in a very off-time of year," Bob Kinney, vice president in charge of landscaping and nursery division, Wilmore Gardens, Denver, CO, remarked. "Any time you can encourage any type of current or potential customer contact, it's very critical."

"Because it's very cold and wet here, it gets the customers thinking about spring," Lambth Marshall, president, Associated Landscape, Inc., Hoyt Court, NC, explained. "All you need is one really good customer. That one customer can turn around and give you 25 customers in the next year."

Being in a show often represents credibility and is a sign of prestige, according to Greg Ash, co-owner and architect, Barker-Ash Landscape

Design, Indianapolis, IN.

"I think it lends more credibility to you. The promoters of an established show will only let companies exhibit they know can do the job and present something that's going to look nice."

Russell Jones, president, J. Franklin Styer Nurseries, Concordville, PA, agrees. "People recognize immediately you're a good contractor. The show itself has a lot of stimulus and is pretty prestigious."

However, Rick Solo, owner of Solo Design Group, Charlotte, NC, believes the prestige of a garden show is questionable.

"I used to think the show was prestigious, but I don't anymore. What I have noticed over the years is the quality of the garden displays really

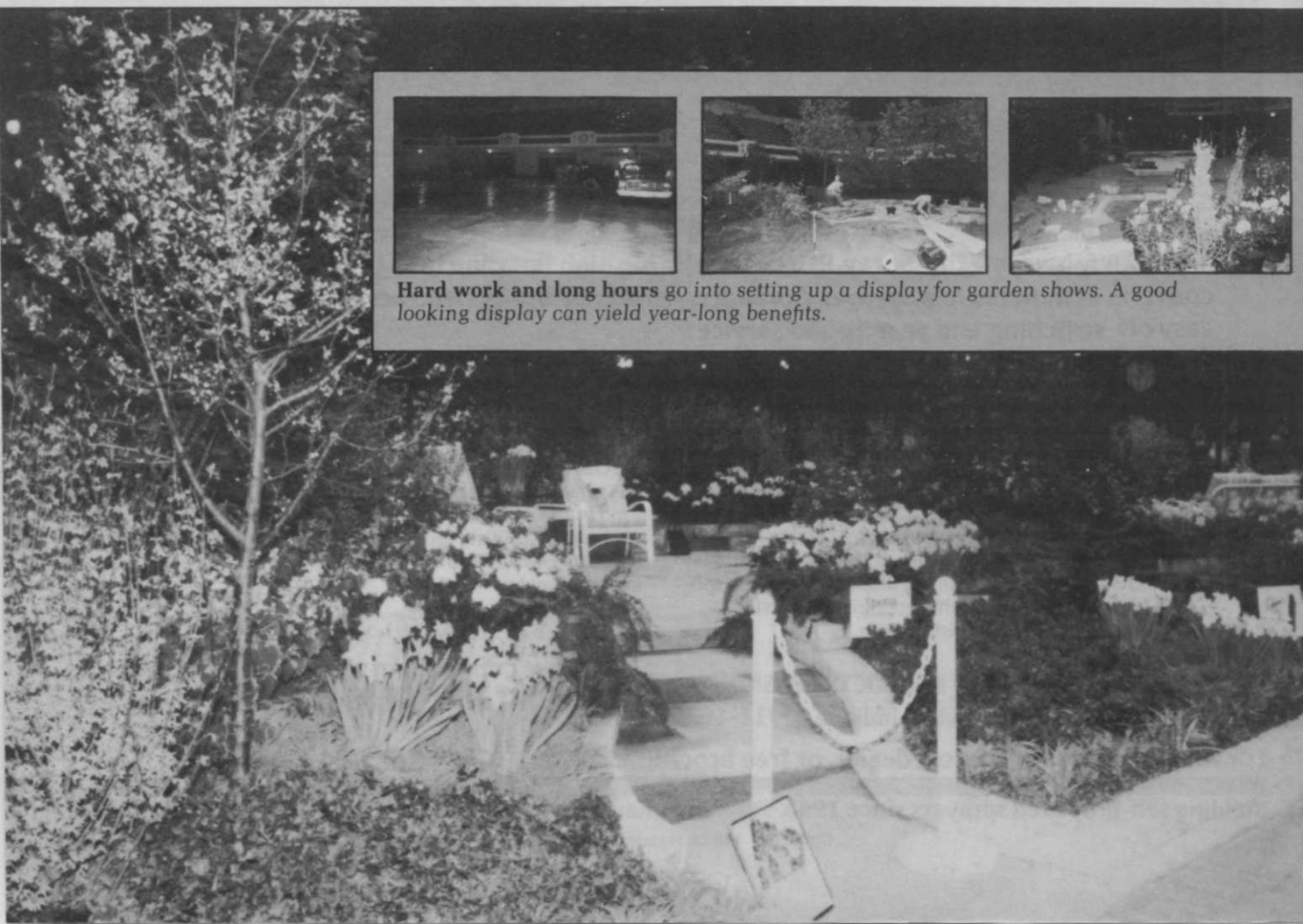
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# Garden Shows

by Nedra Stalter, HBJ Publications, editorial assistant



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**Barnes Nursery & Garden Center, Inc., Huron, OH, won Best of Show at the 1984 Home and Flower Show in Cleveland.**

seems to have gone downhill. It seems to me a lot of the stronger companies are not participating like they used to. I think it may have something to do with whether you get work out of the show. Generally, if you get work out of the show, it is residential and some companies are beginning to move away from the residential market," Solo explained.

Some landscape contractors see the show as a place to invite customers they will be working with in the upcoming season.

"A lot of work that comes out of the shows is getting ready for spring. We arrange to meet clients at the show and take them around as our guests. so, the show is also a sales tool," Jones said.

For others, the show is a way to get together with former customers and talk about updating gardens.

"We use it to see old clients because they are continuously updating their gardens. It's been over a 26 year span because Mr. Loonsten (the owner) has done 26 consecutive shows," Jeannie Loonsten, office manager and vice president, Frits Loonsten Inc., Indianapolis, IN, said. Of course, you have to make a point to keep track of your old customers.

"It is also an educational tool to show people our style," Loonsten said. Style goes beyond the simple how-to of do-it-yourselfers.

Professional exposure is also received at a garden show, according to Mike Spena, president, Spena Landscaping, Highland Heights, OH.

"The incentive of the show is exposure; the people see the garden and it reinforces their idea of us. But, it also gives us professional exposure. It promotes the image within the industry. You get to know a lot of people and, if you're not there, I think you miss some of the association."

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Solo also finds professional exposure a reason to attend the show. "One of the things I have found most beneficial about the show in terms of contacts and exposure is not so much the general public as with other people in the trade. It's almost like a reunion of sorts where you reestablish a lot of business contacts with suppliers, architects and designers, or contractors. I find this to be particularly worthwhile," Solo remarked.

Does the garden show really provide many leads? Rich Baron, president of Suburban Landscaping, Inc., Berea, OH, thinks so.

"I was in a position years ago that I was bidding against people at the show and wasn't getting anything. I wondered why the builders knew so much about the other contractors. I looked into it more and found out they knew more about the contractors because they stopped into the Home and Garden show and talked to them," Baron explained.

"These guys in business don't want to have you come to their office, and try to sell your product. But, if they can talk to you on a Friday night for 20 minutes in a relaxed atmosphere and get an idea what you're about and what you can offer, they tend to remember that more so than somebody pounding them with all kinds of mail," Baron said.

Loonsten has also seen an increase in the number of leads from the show, especially in the last few years.

"We find that we are getting more and more direct leads from the show. Originally, we didn't. People kind of

**"The incentive for being in a garden show is just very simply the hope of achieving some leads in a very off-time of the year."**

put it in the back of their minds. It was kind of a goal. They'd always say, 'When I can afford to do this, I'm going to have Frits Loonsten do it. Now, it's more direct from the show,' Loonsten said.

However, Solo says it depends on the year where he is concerned. "It really varies from year to year. There are some years we get a tremendous volume and there are some we get



Wilmore Nurseries' exhibit at the 1984 Colorado Garden & Home Show.

none at all. It's really difficult to say what the controlling factor is. The thing about the local garden show here is the percentage of people who are realistically potential clients is very small because you're talking about a cross section of the general

public whereas our clientele is not such a broad cross section," Solo explained.

Getting leads from the show isn't the reason to display, according to Spena. "If you look at it as leads, it's like saying 'how many dollars can I

make?' That's not the reason to be in the show. I worry if the garden looks good."

Is a local garden show really worth all of the time and hard work?

Loonsten, whose business may spend up to \$35,000 at the show each year, thinks so. "We lost very little from our show. We couldn't afford to

### "The incentive of the show is exposure ..."

lose a lot."

But, Jim Grabo, president of Highlands Hardware & Nursery, Denver, CO, disagrees.

Solo takes it year by year and has started to diversify his gardens.

"One of the attitudes we've taken with our local garden show is that it's an opportunity to do something unique.

We don't want to do traditional things anymore. It might not be widely accepted, but if nothing else, it would show that we have diversity. That's probably a little riskier approach, but we figured the garden show was a safe place to take the gamble." **WT&T**

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