

UK Garden Centres Report



In bloom and heading for a boom: why workforce management has never been more critical for UK garden centres

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Garden centres are a marvel. Once the place to pick up a quick peony and a questionable garden gnome, they've matured into bonafide destinations. Somewhere to peruse homeware, source houseplants, buy local food, catch up over coffee, play crazy golf, and you can (if you must) still buy that garden gnome.

These are hubs characterised by theatrical merchandising, friendly staff, seasonal concessions and the promise of home cooked fare. They don't compare to any other model in the British retail world; a fact that has bestowed on the sector some inflation-busting superpowers.

New habits are here to stay

In 2020, outdoor space became a pandemic-induced luxury and those that had gardens invested in them like never before. While those without got a sudden hankering to turn flats, studios, and shared houses green with houseplants; generating thousands of hours of social media content in the process.

This green fingered resurgence – fueled by Pinterest, Instagram and the growth of remote working – is a trend that's here to stay. UK garden-related spending [has grown 22% on average since 2021](#) and Savills expects the UK gardening market to top £5bn by 2025.

The UK gardening market could top £5bn by 2025

No stranger to diversification, the industry has moved quickly to capitalise on this change. While most operators have dedicated more retail space to house plants, Dobbies, the UK's largest chain, quickly rolled out a whole new concept. It opened [six Little Dobbies](#) to cater to the demand for house plants, putting these units squarely in urban areas and stocking homeware, gifts and everything a city-based gardener could need.

Beyond plants and pastries

Supported by burgeoning demand and a penchant for innovation, the garden centre industry will continue to evolve. [Savills](#) notes a growing trend towards strategic partnerships with vets, pet shops, children's nurseries and medical centres. These work exceptionally well since they attract an overlapping audience without putting pressure on car parking spaces during peak times. They're also well suited to garden centre locations that tend to be easily accessible by major roads.

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The extra footfall comes in particularly handy for restaurants and cafes, which are rapidly becoming the powerhouse of these sites. For the British Garden Centre Group, the second largest chain in the UK, restaurants now account for a little over [30% of](#) income and are the largest gross margin contributor to the business.

This contribution is likely to hold despite the current cost of living crisis. A sweet treat at the garden centre is further down the list of unnecessary extravagances than an expensive meal out, and garden centre cafes and restaurants are unlikely to feel the pinch of reduced consumer spending to the same extent as the rest of the hospitality industry.

A unique set of challenges

Whether chain or independent, garden centres are innovative, multifaceted businesses. As they grow, they become even more complex.

Traditional retail might have operational similarities to a garden centre when it comes to sourcing inventory or forecasting demand, but crazy golf courses, aquatic centres, cafes and the host of diversified offerings that crop up in the sector create wildly different challenges. There's no other retailer that needs to manage food safety requirements, rotating concessions, perishable goods and biosecurity compliance, and then onboard Santa's elves and an accompanying reindeer handler or two come November.

Garden centre staff have a disproportionate impact on the customer experience compared to other retail venues



This adds another layer of complexity to the operations of these sites; [workforce management](#). Garden centres are managing a highly diverse workforce with very different skill sets across multiple departments. Ensuring they have the right people, in the right place, at the right time is tricky enough, but staffing requirements change season to season and are impacted on a weekly or even daily basis by factors such as the weather.

Any missteps or mistakes in workforce management have a meaningful impact on the staff experience which – in an environment where customer service hinges on friendly staff – can be costly

Centre staff also have a disproportionate impact on the customer experience compared to other retail venues. Visitors expect knowledgeable, friendly staff they can ask for advice on what to plant, where and when. They travel to activations like Santa's grotto and enthusiastic hosts are an essential element of their experience and enjoyment. Any missteps or mistakes in workforce management have a meaningful impact on the staff experience which – in an environment where customer service hinges on friendly staff – can be costly.

Supercharging the workforce

Onboarding and scheduling are two common areas that can make or break the employee experience. A seamless onboarding experience with digitised contracts, where learning resources are available directly from an app, personal details can be input quickly and staff updates are delivered regularly, gives a slick first impression and means that new employees feel connected and can access the resources they need. It also serves as a competitive differentiator in a labour market where staff routinely have multiple offers to choose from.

Scheduling is another sizable challenge. Routine understaffing at certain times or in departments puts additional pressure on staff and has a negative impact on their outlook. [Nearly half of UK retail staff](#) say they feel overworked and underappreciated as a result of staff shortages.

Workforce management platforms then, with the ability to refine onboarding, demand forecasting and scheduling, are increasingly important to the sector. Garden centres need tech solutions that are as agile as their businesses, yet this is a segment that is largely under-served thanks in part to the individualism of its model. Most operators are forced to source solutions designed for retail and then retrofit it to the hospitality aspect of their site. The result is a platform that serves some teams but frustrates others.

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Tech for all the seasons

The solution is a single platform that can deliver for cafe and restaurant teams just as well as it can deliver for retail and entertainment teams. Platforms built for hospitality rather than retail have more transferable functionality, since features like scheduling have been designed for cross functional teams and to accommodate shifts that are staggered throughout the day.

Platforms built for hospitality rather than retail have more transferable functionality to garden centres

The right demand forecasting tool, for example, can use historical owned data, as well as external sources like weather forecasts, to predict demand. Fed into automated scheduling recommendations, this removes the guesswork for managers and minimises the risks of over or understaffing for each department.

While reducing the administrative burden around scheduling has obvious benefits for managers, forecasts generated weeks in advance give staff clarity and security, too. Operators should look for features that enable them to swap shifts with manager approval, update personal information, or access information and training during onboarding from an app, all of which contribute to a seamless employee experience.



An ode to garden centres

The great British garden centre is an institution, and rightly so. These lively sites have become destinations, offering experiences that change with the seasons.

Staff enjoyment and engagement is a key component of the garden centre success story, and managing it gets more complicated as the sector innovates and adapts to meet changing trends and growing consumer demand. This, coupled with the challenges of a competitive labour market and ongoing cost of living crisis, means operators need workforce management solutions that deliver for their specific use case now more than ever before.

One of the UK's largest garden centre chains relies on Fourth to support nearly 3000 staff, leveraging the platform for both restaurant and retail teams. Used nationally across 50 sites, Fourth's Workforce Management solutions reduce the complexity of scheduling and ensure a consistent employee experience, enabling the group to reduce labour spend while still providing exceptional customer service.



Conquer the Day

Reach greater heights with Fourth's AI-driven Workforce and Inventory Management Platform, empowering you to build loyal teams, overcome tight margins, and deliver exceptional customer service.

We are a leader in data-driven workforce and inventory technology for the retail, restaurant, and hospitality sectors. Proudly serving 15,000 customers across 100,000 sites globally, with 2.5m users.

To discover how we can help you to simplify your operations and boost efficiency and profitability, please get in touch. We would love to hear from you.

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