



Photos: Western Supermarkets

# Floral destination

by Cynthia L. McGowan

**Western Supermarkets draws customers with high-quality service and products.**

*A bright atrium houses the inviting full-service floral department at Western Supermarkets' Mountain Brook, Ala., store.*

**W**estern Supermarkets' full-service floral department in Mountain Brook, Ala., delights customers with top-notch service, high-quality design and exciting in-store events. The department has such a reputation for quality, in fact, that it has become a destination for flower-loving customers.

"There are some impulse sales," shares **Leigh Coxwell**, the floral manager. "But most people know what they want when they come in."

The loyal floral clientele enjoys shopping in the bright, airy department, which has the feel of its own shop within the store. Located in a glass-covered atrium at the front, the stylish flower-filled department sets the tone for an upscale gourmet shopping experience. "It creates a good overall ambiance when you walk into the store," Leigh confirms.

## a discerning clientele

The Mountain Brook location is one of seven stores owned by Western Supermarkets, headquartered in Birmingham, Ala. Owner **Ken Hubbard**, who started with the company sacking groceries to pay his way through college, has found success in a com-

petitive market with a winning combination of superior service; high-quality, custom meat departments; large wine selections; and community involvement.

The company also tailors each store to its neighborhood—the company's banners are a mixture of full-service, warehouse and value-conscious stores. In Mountain Brook, that means meeting the needs of a highly affluent clientele. The Birmingham suburb is known as the wealthiest community in Alabama, and it also ranks among one of the top 15 wealthiest in the United States.

To satisfy Mountain Brook's discerning clientele, Western Supermarkets offers first-rate products and services. "We're upscale in both quality and uniqueness," Leigh describes. "You can find things in the store that you can't find in other places."

That includes an extensive wine selection, numbering about 3,000 bottles. "The store is known for its wine department," shares **Brett Hubbard**, Western's director of deli, bakery and floral. "It has one of the largest [wine] counts in the state." In addition, the professional wine staff has tastings and brings in experts for talks about the various offerings.

The full-service floral department is a natural fit in the high-



## western supermarkets

**HEADQUARTERS** Birmingham, Ala.

**OWNER AND CEO** Ken Hubbard

**YEAR FOUNDED** 1948

**STORES** Seven stores in the Birmingham area under four banners: Western Supermarkets (three); Food Depot (two); FoodSmart (one); and Village Market (one)

**MOUNTAIN BROOK STORE SIZE** 19,000 square feet

**COMPANY EMPLOYEES** 300

**MOUNTAIN BROOK FLORAL DEPARTMENT SIZE** 800 square feet

**MOUNTAIN BROOK FLORAL EMPLOYEES** Six, full and part time

**BIGGEST FLORAL HOLIDAY** Valentine's Day

**MOUNTAIN BROOK FLORAL DEPARTMENT'S CONTRIBUTION TO STORE SALES** 3.4 percent

**FLORAL SERVICES** Full-service floral department, offering custom designs, delivery, event and wedding services

**DIRECTOR OF DELI, BAKERY AND FLORAL** Brett Hubbard

**FLORAL MANAGER, MOUNTAIN BROOK STORE** Leigh Coxwell

**WEBSITE** [www.westernsupermarkets.com](http://www.westernsupermarkets.com)

end store and is a key part of Western's niche marketing strategy. The six other stores in the company offer floral in various degrees, with limited service in one and cash-and-carry bouquets in another, and the other four carry flowers only on major holidays such as Valentine's Day and Mother's Day.

All seven stores reflect the company's emphasis on service, Brett expresses. "It's on our logo, 'Where Every Customer is Important,'" he says. "We always want to treat our customers as our guests." That means, for example, offering carryout service, special-ordering products and being responsive to customers' needs.

Leigh agrees, adding, "The No. 1 thing our company promotes is customer service. It starts from the top, and we follow the example." Department heads constantly reinforce the service message, he remarks,

*A showcase arrangement, left, and a lovely pink-hued design, below, demonstrate the department's versatility.*

*The design on the left was created for Western Supermarkets' Fall Wine & Food Festival, which attracts hundreds of people.*



*Potted Phalaenopsis orchids rank among the department's best-selling items.*

and seminars offer refreshers on how to treat customers.

### floral's commitment to service

That commitment to customers is reflected in the Mountain Brook floral department, which offers a complete range of services, including delivery. The six designers, full and part time, keep the floral department staffed from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day and make sure the cooler is stocked with designs for after-hours customers to grab and go.

In the 800-square-foot department, the décor of which includes a mixture of glass and metal tables, wood cabinets and ladder-style fixtures as well as modern hanging lamps and track lighting, customers can choose from extensive single-stem and bunch selections and have the staff create arrangements or bouquets while they shop. The designers work at a large counter, where customers enjoy watching them make their floral magic. "That's a big attraction," Leigh confirms.

The store's extensive selection of gourmet products and wines provides opportunities for gift basket sales. "Our gourmet baskets tend to be really topnotch because we have so much to choose from," Leigh describes. Baskets run from \$25 to \$150, and all are custom made in the floral department.

The department keeps the local hospital's gift shop stocked with flower arrangements as a convenience for visitors, providing designs about three times a week. The gift shop asks only that the designs fit into certain price points. "We have free rein to do whatever design fits into those price points," Leigh describes.

Prom work is a growing part of the floral department's sales. "It

## keys to success

**SERVICE** The full-service floral department at Western Supermarkets' Mountain Brook, Ala., store can meet customers' every floral need, from custom designs to events. The department has its own register for added convenience.

**EXPERIENCED STAFF** The six designers have a combined total of 60 years of experience. New members of the staff train with the more experienced designers to gain knowledge and improve their design skills.

**GETTING THE WORD OUT** The department publicizes its florals by providing flowers for community events as well as through newspaper advertising, social media and word-of-mouth.

just gets bigger and bigger," Leigh shares. "Last prom season, we probably did about 200 corsages and boutonnieres."

Weddings also are an increasing source of business, with word about Western's services being spread by happy brides. Last year, the department handled about 15, and Leigh expects to have more this year. The store's designers will take care of all the couple's needs, from bouquets and boutonnieres to the altar arrangements. "Anything that the customer needs to have done, we can do," Leigh affirms.

## event publicity

That sentiment also describes the department's attitude toward event work, which has been an important avenue for getting the word out about Western Supermarkets' floral services. Although the department does some newspaper advertising and also uses social media regularly, "Just getting out there in the community [at local events] and being visible has brought in more customers than anything else we could have done," Leigh expresses.

Those events include country club and charity soirées, attracting the elite of the community. Floral is showcased prominently in Western Supermarkets' annual Fall Wine & Food Festival at the Birmingham Zoo, the largest event of its kind in the state and a benefit for the local library. "We feature local food products and over 650 wines to taste," Brett shares.

Organization and flexibility in labor scheduling are required when the department has to create multiple centerpieces—sometimes more than 100—while maintaining its daily business. Leigh also has several freelance designers he can call to help out when the load gets heavy.

## "snips and sips"

Another favorite event happens right in the floral department. At the monthly "Snips and Sips," customers create floral designs while sampling wine. "It's a really, really fun event," Leigh shares.

Customers make reservations for the program, which can accommodate 12 people and costs around \$40. "They'll know in advance what we're making, and we'll have all the supplies ready for them—all the flowers, hard goods and equipment they



*Floral Manager Leigh Coxwell works on designs for an event. Leigh has years of experience in the floral and garden center industry.*



*At "Snips and Sips" events, customers create designs while enjoying tastings from the store's large wine shop.*

need—and they will just follow along as I make the arrangement," Leigh explains.

The designs usually are seasonal; for example, the class might make a wreath arrangement at Christmas. "It has gotten a good response," Leigh says. The store posts photos from the events on its Facebook page, showing "fans" how much fun was had and helping to get publicity for future Snips and Sips gatherings.

## favorite flowers

Leigh does the floral buying for the department, with deliveries arriving at least three times a week. Western Supermarkets procures the bulk of its flowers from a Miami importer, and others come from local wholesalers.

Customers' favorite products include the single-stem selection, with white *Hydrangeas*, at \$4 a stem, selling best. "This town just eats them like they were candy!" Leigh jokes.

The flowers-by-the-stem program also includes hybrid tea and spray roses, bells-of-Ireland, *Proteas*, *Liatrises*, *Gerberas*, curly willow, *Hypericum*, orchids, waxflowers and more, with prices from





The single-stem program is popular with customers who enjoy choosing from the abundant, appealing selection.

\$1 to \$7. “I try to keep a unique selection,” Leigh describes.

A dozen 50-centimeter roses for \$10.99 also is a top seller. “I can barely keep them in stock,” Leigh shares.

Bunches are popular, starting at \$4.50 and going up to \$10.99. Customers can buy three of the \$4.50 bunches for \$12. The selection includes roses, *Alstroemerias*, spray mums and *Gerberas*. Mixed bouquets are priced from \$5.99 to \$12.99, with the most popular price point at \$9.99.

During the Christmas season, the department sells fresh garland and wreaths, supplied by a Florida company. They are kept outside under a tent to keep them cool.

Customers prize the department’s *Phalaenopsis* orchid plants, especially white varieties. They sell for \$19.99 in attractive clay pots and for \$24.99 when upgraded with moss and other embellishments. Western Supermarkets also has a thriving outdoor program (see “Outdoor Success,” below).

## “ferocious appetite for balloons”

The department doesn’t carry a full line of giftware, but it does offer a selection of upscale containers. In addition, balloons are a

big customer draw. “The community that the store is located in has a ferocious appetite for balloons,” Leigh describes. “We have a tremendous amount of balloon sales.”

Because of space constraints, the department can keep just a small selection inflated; the bulk is in packages on a rack. Most of its sales are for latex balloons for community and school events. For example, Leigh shares, at homecoming, the local high school will order as many as 400 balloons.

Leigh acknowledges challenges in obtaining helium. “It is a scramble to get it sometimes,” he shares, but as publicity about the helium shortage has increased, customers have gained awareness and understanding about the situation.

Leigh also has an informal arrangement with a gift shop next door that sells balloons. “If we don’t have helium, we send [customers] next door,” Leigh describes, “and they do the same thing with us.” He views this as both being a good neighbor and helping a customer. “It’s a nice way to make the customer happy,” he explains.

## customer relationships

Making customers happy is a key part of the success of the floral department, whose staff has a combined 60 years of floral experience. “We have a lot of experience and a lot of very talented designers,” Brett confirms.

Leigh shares that sentiment, adding, “I have a very, very good staff that has been receptive to new ideas and new ways of doing things. I have full trust in them.”

That trust is shared by the department’s loyal clientele, some of whom ask for favorite designers. “Our customers know our designers, and our designers know our customers,” Leigh describes. “Very good relationships are built.” **sfr**

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## outdoor success

**Western Supermarkets** has a thriving outdoor program at all seven of its stores in the Birmingham, Ala., area. Starting in March, customers will find tents and sidewalks full of hanging baskets, flowering and bedding plants, herbs, vegetables and more.

The outdoor program kicks off with a highly anticipated two-day weekend sale, shares **Brett Hubbard**, Western Supermarkets’ director of deli, bakery and floral. “We have a lot of customers asking when the sale’s going to be,” he expresses.

The outdoor season lasts until October. In the Mountain Brook location, the floral staff, with help from the front-register personnel, take care of the outdoor plants. In the other stores, which don’t have full-service floral departments, store management runs the programs.

Western Supermarkets buys its outdoor plants from local farmers’ markets as well as from growers in Georgia and other Southeastern states. Best-sellers include sunflowers, *Zinnias* and Boston ferns.

The company has a contest each year to encourage the stores to increase their outdoor sales. “We base it on their previous year’s sales and profit,” Brett describes. The store with the biggest increase wins a prize.



The outdoor garden season at Western Supermarkets starts in March and ends in October.