At Lake Forest Flowers in Lake Forest, Ill., in-store classes have become something of a father-daughter affair. Three years ago, Eileen Looby Weber and her dad, John Looby III, introduced the shop’s hands-on design classes to capitalize on people’s interest in shared experiences (rather than gifts) and Weber’s own community connections, including a gig as a TV host for a local program about Lake Forest. (Read more about Weber’s efforts in our cover story on p. 22.)

“People love to be hands-on, and they are excited to take something home,” said Weber.

The events, which range in price from $50 to $75, including materials and supplies, often are tied to a seasonal event. In March 2011, for instance, about people came to a class called “Bring Spring Home.” During the session, Weber and her father taught basic care and handling of spring flowers (including irises, tulips, forsythia and daffodils) and general principles of design. Last month, the pair hosted a popular workshop on designs and decor that transition from summer to fall.

Consistency has been key. At first, Weber held the classes only around the holidays. The second year, she decided to hold them monthly, and that schedule allowed her to build more of a following. Now during peak months (October, November and December), Weber hosts classes every other week for up to 20 people at a time. Weber also offers private classes for small groups (minimum of six).

By the end of the class, “people have a real sense of pride in the arrangement,” and a “gentle shot of humility, too,” said Weber, explaining that, far from encouraging a DIY mentality, the classes underscore the artistry of professionally designed arrangements. “Before the class they might have bought something from their supermarket and shoved it into vase,” she said. “Now, they understand the design... and the classes get them to come into the store.”
BAG OF TIPS

> In this month’s cover story (p.22), floral industry members who are still in the early stages of their professional careers — but thinking big already — reveal some of their best tips and plans. Here are a few more ideas and reminders that are too good not to share:

**Embrace the Line Item.** When Skip Paal of Rutland Beard Florist in Maryland and New Jersey got married, he noticed something striking: Every vendor included line item expenses. Caterers had them for gratuity. Limos had them for tolls. It may not have been a romantic nuptial insight but it’s made a big difference to Paal’s family business. “It’s the norm within the industry,” he said. “We now have a separate line item on wedding proposals for delivery and setup, and that covers vehicle expenses, staff, fuel — everything. If the wedding requires four people to setup, we include all the costs of having four people there.”

**Move Freely.** At Lake Forest Flowers in Lake Forest, Ill., Eileen Looby Weber splurged on three Samsung tablets for staff members to use. “When brides come in they all want to show us their Pinterest page,” Weber said. And while many of the brides come armed with their own tablets, the shop’s devices allow salespeople to interact with the brides — and customers beyond weddings — with a familiar, updated technology. Plus the tablets give the team the ability to roam the store as they talk to clients and pull up websites or design inspiration. “They’re also great if customers want to snap a picture before the design goes out,” Weber said.

**Get Pinned.** In Squamish, British Columbia, Alanna Volp — who confesses to finding the daily grind of Facebook tiresome — said Pinterest is one web resource she loves to use. “With Pinterest, it is so easy to stay on top of what is trending,” she said. “Staying current, local and cutting edge and therefore being willing to change styles, materials and forms with the times is imperative.” (Floral Management took an in-depth look at Pinterest in April 2012; find it at www.safnow.org/floralmanagement.)

**Rephrase the Question.** Because Volp buys much of her floral inventory locally she’s able to capture sales from customers who are looking for green, regional alternatives. But selling to them — and ensuring that she doesn’t have wasted product — required some staff training. “We buy from an auction so we never know what is going to be abundant and looking fresh until the day we go,” she said. “So instead of asking the customer what they want to order, I am training my staff to first mention, ‘Would you like to hear what we are featuring this week?’”

THE HALLOWEEN SCENE

> Last year, Matthew Shay, president and CEO of the National Retail Federation, called Halloween one of the “fastest-growing” and “most widely-loved” holidays of the year. With more than 170 million people celebrating the holiday in 2012, it’s no wonder. Be ready for the goblins in your area and consider:

- Last year, the average person spent an estimated $79.82 on decorations, costumes and candy, up from $72.31 in 2011, with total Halloween spending expected to reach $8 billion.

- Of those buying or making costumes, the average person planned to spend $28.65 on costumes in 2012, up slightly from $26.52 in 2011.

- Of the people who were planning to celebrate Halloween in 2012, 51.4 percent planned to decorate their home or yard, up from 49.5 percent in 2011.

IN ADDITION TO THAT APPLE . . .

> Back to school time is ripe for incremental sales. Try these ideas, recently suggested by SAF Director of Marketing Jenny Scala, on SAF’s Flower Factor blog (www.aboutflowersblog.com)

- Transform single carnations into kids’ favorite characters, such as the cast of Sesame Street.

- Appeal to pre-teens’ emerging sense of style with arrangements in creative containers, such as pink high-top sneakers.

- Stimulate youngsters’ imaginations with a terrarium or a carnivorous plant, such as a venus flytrap. Trumpet the learning experience that accompanies caring for a plant.

- Show collegiate students some love with flowers in their school colors arranged in a mascot vase, which becomes a keepsake that holds pens and pencils in the dorm room.

(Pop) Culture Queen Using Pinterest shows Alanna Volp’s clients she stays atop trends.

Collegiate Carnations Early in August, these too-adorable-for-words carnation creatures, created by Carol Caggiano, AAF, PFCI, went viral shortly after SAF posted them on its consumer FlowerFactor blog (www.aboutflowersblog.com): More than 8,000 people saw the post within hours.