

Backyard Getaway Offers Classes for Water Garden Hobbyists

Dave and Lisa Burns opened the Backyard Getaway Store in Sarasota, Fla., because they wanted to do something they loved for a living.

Dave and Lisa Burns opened the Backyard Getaway Store in Sarasota, Fla., because they wanted to do something they loved for a living.

After almost two years in business they've figured out how to share that passion with customers, offering everything from free classes and pond parades to home décor and pond equipment, as well as pond construction and maintenance.

Dave and Lisa Burns

But more importantly they've made the store a fun place to hang out. At the Backyard Getaway people can learn how to get koi to eat out of their hands, attend a night luau or read a magazine over a cup of coffee.

The business philosophy is working. The Burnses, both originally from New York, estimate that their sales have at least doubled this past year.

Display ponds at The Backyard Getaway Store showcase the owners' pond-building skills.

"We offer one-stop shopping with good customer service," Lisa says.

"If we can't make somebody happy then what are we doing here?"

Disappearing fountain kits greet customers and give them ideas for their own backyard oasis.

The couple's interest in water gardens started 12 years ago when Dave bought a kit to build a pre-formed pond.

He soon put in another pond, which involved digging a 2-foot-deep hole through limerock using a jackhammer. Learning as he went, Dave used the limerock to build a surrounding waterfall and the hobby took off.

From Hobby to Business

After spending four years helping family and friends build ponds in their backyards, the couple, who also maintain a drywall contracting business, decided to open their own store. But first they did their homework.

They spent two years scouting locations, finally choosing to lease an old armored truck building located on busy U.S. 41 from an owner flexible enough to let them dig large holes for ponds.

They checked out their competition, too. The Burnses knew that to buy koi, plants and food required at least a one-hour drive to Tampa or Venice. It turned out that little was offered in the area beyond big-box stores.

"I was really worried about [big-box stores] in the beginning but once we started giving [people] knowledge we realized we didn't have to worry about that," Dave says.

To get the business going the Burnses sold off four rental properties and invested \$40,000 in the venture. They have a three-year lease on the site, which has 2,000 square feet of outdoor space and a 2,000-gallon outdoor pond.

Inside, the couple sells water garden supplies, as well as home décor items, such as decorative pots and wine bottle holders to appeal to Florida tourists.

While not a huge moneymaker, the items tend to sell around the holidays and attract nearby residents.

"We're in an area with a lot of condos where you might not have room to put in a pond but a fountain for the back porch would work," Lisa says. "We try to cover all the bases."

Lisa staffs the store with help from her father, while Dave spends weekdays on the road building ponds.

They have nearly made back their initial investment, half of their revenue coming from retail sales and the other half from construction.

Based on the number of requests they are getting for pond building—13 in the past year—they expect that side of the business to continue growing.

They keep 100 to 150 koi in a 1,000-gallon tank, and they're planning on doubling that number. They also have a 300-gallon lily bin and other bins for aquatic plants.

The business didn't start out that big, which has cost the couple.

Initially, they kept a smaller number of koi in two 100-gallon tubs, and later bought a 450-gallon tub.

"You put a lot of money into these tubs and then you're not using them," Lisa says. "We never knew we'd get that big."

Always looking for ways to help their customers, the Burnses now lend out the tubs for people to quarantine sick fish at home.

Another hurdle has been finding the right advertising. So far the couple has found television to be occasionally effective, while radio ads haven't paid off.

The store's website, which they put up six months after opening, also has brought in customers. It is still a work in progress, and they hope to set up online sales in a few months.

Word of Mouth

But the majority of customers say they learned about the store through friends or family.

That's likely because of the frequent activities the Burnses offer.

The couple has monthly free clinics at the store, inviting speakers to talk to hobbyists about aquatic plants, fish health, water quality and feng shui for gardens. The events have attracted up to 50 people.

In April, the Burnses organized their first pond parade, putting together a tour of 13 ponds, about half of which were built by Dave. Other ponds featured were built by loyal DIY customers, who built their ponds using the store's products.

The couple sold 149 tickets to the event, donating the proceeds to the Manatee Glens Child Welfare Program, and held a party at the store afterward with a live band and picnic dinner.

Since then, they've seen an increase in store traffic, with customers frequently asking about the parade ponds.

Lisa also puts out a two-page newsletter with pond tips and information about sales and upcoming events.

The result has been a regular crowd of customers coming to the store and sharing their interest in ponds with each other.

"We're getting people to come in and enjoy themselves, and see how enjoyable a pond can be in their backyard," Lisa says.

Allison Fashek is an occasional contributor to Water Garden News. Her last article, "Pre-Formed Pond Sparks Home-Based Business," appeared in the May issue.

At a Glance

Business name: The Backyard Getaway Store

Contact info: 2930 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, Florida 34234

Phone/Web: 941-359-7663; <http://www.backyardgetaway.net/>

Hours of operation: Tuesday-Friday 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m.–5 p.m., Sunday 12:30–4:30 p.m., closed Monday

Years in business: Almost 2

Staff: 2-3 (all family)

Space dimensions: Indoors: 1,000 square feet
Outdoors: 2,000 square feet

Pond Giveaway

While many of Dave and Lisa Burns' free clinics are popular, one in particular has a waiting list—pond building.

Customers are clamoring to be part of the class, held just a couple of times a year, because one lucky person gets to build a pond in his or her back yard with the help of classmates and instruction from the Burnses.

To prepare for the class, the Burnses dig a hole and get the pond's framework finished before anyone arrives. But the rest is largely up to the group, which can include more than 40 people, and they're expected to get their hands dirty.

Dave, who spends weekdays building or maintaining people's ponds, teaches techniques such as how to lay rocks and install bottom drains and filtration systems.

The couple came up with the idea, but got some advice on how to organize the class from a supplier. The clinic falls in line with their goal of educating their customers and keeping them coming back to the store.

"We want to show them it's not such a scary thing to do it themselves," Lisa says. "You can do it yourself at a fraction of the cost and have just as much enjoyment, if not more."

To help make the day fun, the couple usually brings along food. But the best part for participants may be seeing their hard work pay off so quickly.

"We have the water running before they leave," Dave says. —A.F.