

Garden Ponds Nursery Finds Balance in Paradise

Ken Bernard, of Garden Ponds Nursery, loves what he does and he shares that passion with his customers.

Name of business: Garden Ponds Nursery

Location: 4387-A Kahili Makai Rd., Kilauea, Hawaii

Phone: (808) 639-3473

Hours of operation: Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and by appointment
Years in business: 4 years as a pond nursery

Staff: two full-time (including himself), two part-time, one "very" part-time

Space: One acre of land leased from an organic farm

Annual gross revenue: \$225,000 in 2004, which included about 45 pond maintenance customers

Paradise can do funny things to a person.

Imagine choosing to follow a passion instead of scrambling to make a living, and teaching people to care for their own ponds instead of charging them to employ your skills.

That's exactly what Ken Bernard, owner of Garden Ponds Nursery in Kilauea, Hawaii, on the north shore of Kauai, decided to do.

"I can't imagine getting tired of lilies and lotuses," he said. "When I first started in this hobby, people kept their trade secrets to themselves. Now, people are so much more open to sharing. Even Walter Pagel gives away his secrets online. Sharing the information only benefits the industry."

Bernard sells 41 varieties of waterlilies. The ones that made the cut thrived in the semi-tropical environment and were relatively easy for his clients to care for.

Photograph by Wendy Bedwell-Wilson
This corporate manager turned landscape contractor turned water garden aficionado turned impassioned teacher has one simple goal: to show the 55,000 people living on the island how to create and maintain their own water gardens.

"I'm not in it for the money," he said. "I'm in it for the love of it; for the love of teaching water gardening."

He doesn't want to grow his business; he wants to grow his passion for water gardens in others.

Bernard opens the doors of Garden Ponds three days a week and by appointment only.

This small sign welcomes visitors to Garden Ponds Nursery in Kilauea, Hawaii, on the north shore of Kauai, open three days a week and by appointment.

Photograph by Wendy Bedwell-Wilson

He's turning away pond maintenance clients, choosing instead to teach them to do it themselves during 10 two-hour classes per year.

His approach is working. Every year, interest in his classes, and water gardening, increases. "Pond maintenance used to bring in most of our revenue," he said of the \$225,000 gross revenue the nursery brought in last year. "But now the nursery is making more. I've been teaching so many people, I'm giving the business away. I'm training people to care for their own gardens."

Bernard hasn't fallen off the deep end. He's following his dream. Twelve years ago, he owned and operated a thriving landscaping business. Managing a dozen employees who maintained enormous estates, he had more work than he knew what to do with. It was through a landscaping job that he discovered his true passion.

Bernard's setups require no filter pump or regular maintenance—just a few fish, snails, oxygenating plants and shade from lily pads to keep algae growth to a minimum.

Photo by Wendy Bedwell-Wilson

"I ended up getting an account who had a 80,000-gallon water garden," he recalled. "I told him that I didn't know a thing about water gardens, but he said, "It's easy. I'll show you."

So Bernard strapped on the man's waders and dove in.

"When the man told me I was spending too much time in the pond, I knew I was on to something," Bernard said.

A trip to Bali solidified his hunch. His mentor, Betsy Sakata, told him that if he ever wanted to travel anywhere to learn about water gardening, Bali was the place to go.

"They know how to use water better than anyone," he recalled her saying. "And there are no mosquitoes there. A lot of shops have container gardens, but they all have fish. Even the rice patties and irrigation ditches have fish. The fish eat the mosquito larvae."

He returned to Kauai with a 20-foot shipping container full of statues and ceramic containers, and wisdom from such experts as world-renowned tropical water garden designer Made Wijaya, but also a vision of helping Kauai manage its mosquito population.

Bernard and his nursery manager, Scott Ladd, hope to share the wonders of water gardening with all 55,000 Kauai residents.

Photograph by Wendy Bedwell-Wilson

"If Bali can do it, we can do it," Bernard laughed.

So while sharing his knowledge and love of water gardening, he also felt a desire to create a place of peace and balance, just as he'd found in Bali.

"I wanted to create an example of what customers can have in their own gardens," he said.

Bernard downsized his landscaping business from 12 employees to two and dedicated himself to doing what he loved.

"I decided I only wanted to do what I enjoyed doing for the rest of my life," he said. "I was over hedge trimmers."

That was nearly four years ago. Now, Bernard employs one full-time, two part-time and one "very" part-time employee. He kept 45 of his pond maintenance customers, but has no desire to seek more. Balance has become the business' mantra, its mainstay being container gardens with completely balanced ecosystems.

Hawaii sun feels nice while on vacation, but that same sun eight hours a day, five days a week poses a real hazard.

"A friend of mine was a docent for years at Lotus Land near Santa Barbara," said Ken Bernard, owner of Garden Ponds Nursery in Kilauea, Hawaii. "She moved here and helped me care for my 150 container gardens before I started the nursery. She babysat my lilies and learned all she could about the hobby.

"But a few years ago, she was diagnosed with skin cancer," he said. "And she told me she had to stop gardening. I don't want that ever to happen to me."

Bernard uses every precaution possible to keep his skin shielded from the tropical rays.

"I check the location of the sun wherever I'm working and try to work in the shade," he said, his face shielded by his trademark straw hat. "I'm conscious of which way I'm facing and keep the sun at my back."

He also schedules his pond maintenance time when the harmful rays are lowest.

"The mornings and late afternoons are when the UV rays are less harmful," he said. "I want to keep doing this the rest of my life."-W.B.W.

"A couple of platies for color and a few snails to eat the algae and mosquito larvae, oxygenating plants that live off the

excess nutrients in the water and shade-creating plants, like water lilies, that minimize the growth of algae create a balanced ecosystem," Bernard said. "All that's required is a little water, a little pruning and a little fertilizer."

Tying together this sense of balance with his love of teaching, Bernard recently decided to cut his water lily selection nearly in half.

"When I started out, I wanted as many water lilies as I could get," he said. "At one time, I was proud to have 70 different varieties of water lilies."

But his original purpose came back into focus. Bernard had neither the plans nor the desire to expand his 1-acre nursery.

"Why fill the space?" he asked rhetorically. "Thirty of them didn't really sell. They were hard to grow and only interested those eclectic collectors anyway."

So he dropped 29 types, choosing to keep 41 that were easy to grow in the semi-tropical climate.

Bernard hosts 10 classes per year. Students listen intently as he describes how to clean, divide and propagate tropical and hardy lotuses.

Photograph by Wendy Bedwell-Wilson

"Because I'd been teaching water gardening, I wanted my students to be successful," he said. "I concentrated on the best performers for our area. I kept some hardies, too, because some have colors not found in the tropical varieties."

Island folk prefer the lilies that bloom year-round, he said. "But I tell them the ones that go dormant for awhile are worth the wait."

Another criteria was how readily the lilies go to seed.

"Some lilies can be pests here," he said. "They could be a problem if they got loose in the environment. So I also chose plants that don't go to seed easily."

Bernard concerns himself with keeping every lily tagged, and he encourages his customers and students to do the same.

"If we don't know what it is, we throw it away," he said. "We have all our plants named and tracked to keep the varieties pure. It's an advantage of having a limited space, of not being a wholesale nursery."

Puff the Magic Dragon welcomes locals and visitors to the land of Hanalei.

Photograph by Wendy Bedwell-Wilson Bernard's 41 varieties of lilies, and his many other bog and marginal plants, grow in colorful ceramic pots and sit next to statues of Buddha, Ganesh and various Balinese idols. Fountains flow like the energy in the garden's Feng Shui design.

"This nursery is different than other nurseries," he said. "This is a small, sweet place to teach water gardening and it's purpose is to create a place of peace and balance."

Wendy Bedwell-Wilson, a regular contributor, is former managing editor of Water Garden News.