

Gateway Garden Center Creates Lasting Success

Peg Castorani, owner of Gateway Garden Center in Hockessin, Del., used to help people build their dream water gardens, but as her business has changed she finds herself spending most of her time fixing people's garden nightmares.

Sales of tropical water lilies have been up for the past two years, in part, because Peg tried them out in her own garden and recommends them to customers. Peg Castorani, owner of Gateway Garden Center in Hockessin, Del., used to help people build their dream water gardens, but as her business has changed she finds herself spending most of her time fixing people's garden nightmares.

One customer called her when heavy rains lifted the liner from his pond, which was the lowest in a descending series of ponds, and his fish washed out onto the grass.

The pond had been installed in a low-lying area, a mistake that she sees a lot.

"This is why the homeowner needs to seek expertise from as many people as he can," Peg says. "I ask people to bring in their plans and I say, 'I'm not trying to sell you anything.'"

Display ponds dot the 1 acre of outdoor space at Gateway Garden Center. Peg and her staff members use their knowledge and personal experience to help customers achieve the bliss that eludes them when their gardens aren't working out. The business, which she runs with her husband Steve Castorani, offers aquatic plants, filters, organic pest and weed management products and a variety of koi and goldfish.

Peg opened the water garden section of the Gateway Garden Center 13 years ago, as an outgrowth of the garden center that Steve started in 1979 before quitting his landscaping business.

She was talking to a salesman in the store one day and he asked her where all her water garden products were, which piqued her interest. After the salesman's visit, she realized she had the "all-consuming thirst for knowledge" that is necessary to run a water garden business.

"It has to become sort of an obsession," she says.

For the first seven or eight years, the business grew an average of 25 percent a year. But recently, the growth has slowed as websites, big-box stores and increased local competition have nibbled at her market share. The garden center has been open since 1979 and specializes in organic garden solutions.

When she started out, she had the only business doing water gardens within 30 miles, she says. Now there are five others competing with her near Hockessin, which is in the suburbs of Wilmington, Del., about 40 miles south of Philadelphia.

So she and her staff of five year-round and four seasonal full-time employees set themselves apart by educating themselves and their customers about products and pond design.

With the rise of do-it-yourself kits and installations by landscapers who aren't experts in water gardens, Peg has seen more and more water garden disasters.

She and her staff spend about 80 percent of their time helping people out of their predicaments, because Gateway Garden Center does not do installations. They have worked with a local contractor for the past 15 years, about the time that Steve gave up his landscaping business for retail.

About 20 percent of the business is helping first-time do-it-yourselfers and others looking for products. The other 20 percent of their business is helping first-time do-it-yourselfers and others looking for products. For people who seek expert advice, water garden manager Joe Wachter counsels people to pick a good site and keep it simple.

With high-quality building materials and a low-maintenance filter system, people can have a successful pond with just two hours of maintenance a week, he says.

The garden center's website, www.gatewaygardens.com, offers a five-step tutorial on "planning your perfect pond," as well as introductions to tap water de-chlorination, pumps and filters.

Wachter and the staff stay up on the products and the science by attending staff training sessions Peg puts on twice a year.

Since shelf space is limited, Peg wants to carry the best products and updates them frequently, despite the complaints of the organization's chief executive officer and president: her husband Steve.

"My husband says to me, 'you change your product line every year,'" she says, with a laugh. "We're more consistent now in what we offer."

Peg Castorini

The staff often tests products before advising customers what they should buy, even the big-ticket items.

"There are 100 designers," Peg says. "We have to figure out which one is the best one."

Peg will even try things in her home garden and then recommend the products to her customers. Sales of tropical water lilies have been up for the past two years, in part, because Peg found it works for her and brings her joy.

Peg's consciousness of environmental issues has also led her to carry more organic products every year. She carries a tea tree oil product that helps fish fight bacteria and get rid of ulcers.

"People are more and more sensitive to that every year," she says.

The garden center side of the store has decreased the amount of chemical pesticides and is going with more natural garden solutions.

Despite all of her efforts to serve her customers and carry the best products, she finds the most important factor in her business success is often something out of her control: the weather.

She says if it rains during the weekends in the spring, people tend to get discouraged and won't invest as much in their water gardens.

But a few sunny days on those weekends, when she does the bulk of her business for the year, can mean a successful season.

To thank her customers and give back to the community, Peg organizes the annual Water Garden Tour. The event benefits the Delaware Center for Horticulture in Wilmington and provides scholarships for disadvantaged children who are interested in horticulture. Next year's tour will be held on Saturday, July 22.

Peg says she's in the business for the joy she finds in water gardens. And she keeps a sense of humor about the little ironies of life that can sometimes affect her business.

Case in point: despite the fact she tells people to avoid putting their ponds in areas where water gathers, she faces some of the same problems at the garden center. When Hurricane Floyd rolled through Delaware in Sept. 1999, the torrential rains lifted the store's ponds, and the fish swam out into the retention basins.

"The big beautiful koi just swam out of town," she says.

Matt Van Dusen is a freelance writer based in Valparaiso, Ind.

At a Glance:

Name of Business: Gateway Garden Center

Owner(s): Peg and Steve Castorani

Contact: 302-239-2727; www.gatewaygardens.com; 7277 Lancaster Pike, Hockessin, Del., 19707

Years in Business: Garden center 26 years, water garden section 13 years

Number of Employees: 5 year-round, 4 seasonal

Size of Facility: 1 acre outdoor space; 1,000 square foot retail space, 400 square foot shed

Annual Gross Revenue 2004: Approximately \$1,500,000 (whole store); \$125,000 (water garden section)

Services Offered: Design, maintenance, retail sales, education