

## Nevada Water Gardens in Las Vegas

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The recently opened Wynn casino (above) in Las Vegas features several ponds, some of which are stocked with aquatic plants from Nevada Water Gardens, including Okada Japanese Steakhouse (below). suffered a heart attack in Jan. 2003, one of her customers called and demanded to know why nobody had told him that Jean was in the hospital.

The businesses' regular customers and clients, including the Bellagio casino, all sent flowers and well wishes, inquiring anxiously about her condition.

"They just all feel like family," Jean says.

And that, says the Womacks, is the key to their vibrant and successful water garden retail, design and installation business, established in 1988.

Jean moved to the desert from Hawaii after marrying her husband Larry in 1986. At their home in Las Vegas they discovered a small pond on the back corner of the property, which was dry most of the year.

Larry wanted to use the depression as a compost heap. Jean had other plans. "I wanted water," she said. "I needed water, being from Hawaii."

So they cleaned it out, lined it and filled it with water. Pioneers in their time, Jean said they secured the surrounding stone with yellow expandable insulation foam and trimmed off the edges. The most difficult part of the whole experiment, she said, was finding a water lily to add. They searched the desert high and low. A friend had two starts, so they took one, planted it and the rest is history.

Their current business boasts a wide range of products and services, including custom biofiltration components, beneficial bacteria cultures, an aquatic nursery, koi sales, landscape décor items, a palm tree growing operation, garden gifts, water feature design and installation and a full line of water garden supplies.

Aquatic greenhouses shade delicate plants from direct desert sun.

Larry, who retired as a 747 captain from Northwest Airlines, and Jean, a retired H&R Block district manager, opened Nevada Water Gardens in their back yard.

"We just kept adding ponds," Jean said. "In the time frame when we did this, in 1988, water gardens had gotten really big on the West Coast, but not here. Larry's friends laughed at him when he said he was going to retire to raise waterlilies in the desert."

Larry's laughing now.

The family business has thrived on a sense of community and a dedication to the best possible customer service.

"You have to have a passion for people, truly," Jean says. "That's where most businesses fail ... People pay for service. People will pay more for better service. I can't standing walking into a place and feeling like I'm invisible."

Carved stone statuary appeals to the customer's desire for backyard décor.

Despite its location in one of the fastest growing cities and playgrounds in the U.S., the Womacks pride themselves on creating a personal atmosphere that caters to the individual.

"We may have 1.4 million people in this town, but it's still a small town," Jean said.

"We follow up with each of our customers. In this day and age people need that. We care. You've got to be that way. [Our customers] like to feel they're as important as Steve Wynn."

Nevada Water Gardens conducts educational seminars in the spring and fall on installing liners, filtration, plants and pond fish food. Each seminar includes discounts on related products. They publish newsletters and offer a bullfrog bucks program, rewarding customers with coupons that are redeemable in the off season.

#### AT A GLANCE

Address: 5445 Caliente St., Las Vegas, Nev., 89119

Years in Business: 17

Full-Time Staff: 8

Outdoor Space: Display & Lily Ponds = 3 acres

Retail Space: 1,000 square feet

Annual Gross Revenue 2004: \$750,000 (40% Plants, 30% Fish, 30% Misc. Merchandise) During pending litigations with the State of Nevada, the business' installation operations were suspended.

The business has taken a similar approach, over the last 10 years, with its wholesale landscaping clients, including Green Planet Landscaping, Park West, Southwick Architects and Natural Illusions. Jean says they use education as a way to ensure repeat business and strengthen the vitality of the industry, in general.

"They come in and say, 'Give me everything I need for an 8 by 10 pond,'" she said. "They think, 'Oh, anybody can put in a pond.' They have no concept."

Instead of experiencing frustration about the lack of knowledge, Jean says it offers a golden opportunity for both the business and the industry at large.

"That's what I think makes this industry so neat. We all share."

Garden benches and bridges round out the diverse inventory at Nevada Water Gardens.

It is that same desire to strengthen the industry that led Larry to take a gamble.

More than a year ago, Larry began installing water features without the required Nevada State Contractors' Board licenses for landscaping, pool and spa installation, and masonry. The act of defiance was meant to send a message to the state board that the licenses required for water feature installation were inappropriate and a new set of guidelines needed to be drafted.

As a result, the state of Nevada issued a cease-and-desist order, which forced Larry to suspend his installation business. He answered by filing a lawsuit against the state, pushing the matter before a district judge. The judge agreed to lift the order under the condition that Larry work with state licensing officials to develop new guidelines for installing "live water features."

The display grounds at Nevada Water Gardens showcases a wide variety of pond styles and merchandise available to the consumer. Larry, now president of the National Association of Pond Professionals, recently announced the completion of a basic certification exam, which he hopes will be adopted by the state of Nevada and provide an example for a similar national licensing exam.

Larry is now free to resume the installation portion of his business. However, he sees more potential for growth in the other sectors of his business.

The plant business has grown far beyond our expectations," says Larry, "so we're going to concentrate in that direction."

Nevada Water Gardens has worked for several high-profile Las Vegas casinos, including The Bellagio, J.W. Marriott Resort and Spa and, most recently, Steve Wynn's multi-billion-dollar casino rimmed by expansive water features. They've even branched out to the neighboring casino towns of Laughlin and Mesquite.

You might think being at the center of all this glamour and wealth, in the midst of water-feature heaven, would send a small business racing to grab large accounts with big payoffs. But that's just not the case with Nevada Water Gardens.

"It's not something I really want to stay on," Jean says.

They try to stay away from taking on big casino jobs, she says, but take on the work when their colleagues end up managing or maintaining the numerous water features on The Strip. They can't turn down a friend.

Jean says the demands and tight deadlines of large casino operations have kept Nevada Water Gardens from jumping into more large accounts.

"[Casinos] are very demanding," she said. "They have deadlines. You have to meet them. That's it."

Jean said the recently completed Wynn casino called in a massive aquatic plant order, including more than 100 water lilies. Jean said it wanted no white blooms, as white blooms symbolize death. It had very specific reasons behind everything and was a client with very particular taste. The demand for aquatic plants has grown steadily in the hot, dry environment, although not many plants can survive the hostile desert conditions.

Only certain plants will tolerate the direct sun and wind. Jean says she won't offer a plant until they've grown it themselves successfully for several seasons.

"Everybody in the beginning wanted a James Brydon," she said, "but the minute it opens and the sun hits it, it turns black. We use it first to make sure it works ... I don't want to sell it to somebody without making sure."

Even the sandy soil is not suitable for growing most plants.

"We have to truck our dirt in," Jean said, motioning to a scrap of paper tacked up on the office bulletin board. "We have Jimmy. He's our dirt guy."

Las Vegas is not your average city. From climate to purchasing habits, the variables in this round-the-clock city are just plain different. Sun hats emphasize the hot, dry and windy environment and remind customers to prepare accordingly.

When Nevada Water Gardens started advertising, they decided to try local cable TV. Their first ad appeared at 2:00 in the morning. People, told them they were crazy and that nobody would ever see the ad, but Jean said their first customer from advertising specifically mentioned the early morning commercial.

In a town that never sleeps, business have to earn their reputations in order to convince their clients they're in it for the long haul.

"The thing about Las Vegas is it seems you have to be here about 10 years before you get a shot," says Larry.

The future looks promising for this water gardening business that has, indeed, been given a shot. Clear signage hangs over holding tanks filled with koi of varying size and color.

The aquatic plant growing operation is moving from an off-site parcel of land the Womack's are currently renting to a plot next to their retail operation. And a second retirement may soon be in the works for Larry and Jean, who hope to pass the business on to their daughter and son-in-law. Though, says Larry, you can never really retire from your true passion.

"I tried to retire last fall," he says.