

Water Gardening Partners Double Potential

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The companies cohabitate the same North Haven, Conn., property, and though they function symbiotically they count their pennies separately. The "two heads are better than one" theory has worked for them, and they believe that their one-in-a-million friendship is a key ingredient for success.

"One of the things I've found throughout the country is that some people are good at plants, some are good at being hard goods distributors, and some are good at farming and selling fish, but we're unique in that we do everything well," Dietter Stone pulls water hyacinths from a display pond for resale to clients of Comets to Koi.says. "I could never do what Steve does on top of what I do. I don't have that extra 70 hours a week."

Pooling Resources

Dietter grew up in the plant nursery business and received a business degree from the University of Rhode Island in 1986. Stone worked as a machine maintenance mechanic until an injury took him off of the job. Fortunately, he still had enthusiastic koi and tropical fish hobby that he had been cultivating for 20 years.

Stone knew Dietter only through the aquatic plant nursery that Dietter owned, but approached the seasoned pro in 2001 with an idea-to allow him to raise fish on the property. Dietter agreed, but wasn't convinced, initially, that he should stop "fishing around" himself.

"When Steve approached me I told him that I was still going to sell fish at my nursery, but when I started to see his level of commitment to his business, I gave it over to him. I hope Steve makes millions," Dietter says.

The unique synergy between the two businesses increases market share for both owners.

"If Steve's out delivering fish, I offer to give him 15 percent of my sales if he delivers my goods," Dietter says. "Steve has brought some very valuable customers in through the koi world, and they become customers for liners and plants. Likewise, if I'm selling plants to somebody, I ask them if they've ever thought of doing fish. I believe that the only way to succeed in business today is to pool your resources."

Dietter eventually gave Stone half of his space to grow and keep fish. Before Stone came along, Dietter says the water garden shop did about \$500 to \$800 of fish sales in a weekend. Today, the combined businesses do \$3,000 to \$4,000 in a weekend.

"Playing with fish as a hobbyist and being a fish farmer are two different things," Dietter says. "My problem was that I was out building and servicing ponds, propagating plants, building the garden center, and I didn't have that extra day in May to pick up fish. There were some instances where I didn't have fish for a weekend."

Stone does far more than play with fish. Dietter says he has become a true professional in the field and has earned a business degree during his tenure with Dietter.

"When I worked in a factory it was humdrum life," Stone says. "You punch in and A display pond and holding tanks sheltered by a greenhouse allow Comets to Koi customers to shop in comfort.out and you go home. Now, I would love to have a half hour for lunch, but when I worked for someone else I complained that half an hour wasn't enough. I have the freedom to do anything now, but it's up to me to make my wages for the year."

Getting Along Swimmingly

Both men say one of the biggest perks to the arrangement is that they are the best employees for each other's business. Each man works in his own business with his own customers, but helps the other as if he has an interest in the other's company.

"If I'm walking around the farm and I see a bunch of plants that are dry, I'll pick up a hose and make sure they get water or make sure that one of the employees does it," Stone says. "If I leave a hose on and Rob sees that, he'll shut it off. We cover each other. We'd like to see other companies do the same thing. Nobody can do everything and employees don't give the same level of commitment."

Despite the obvious perks in working together, the pair has no intention of merging

At A Glance

Name of Business: Dietter's Water Garden and Comets of Koi.

Owner(s): Rob Dietter (Dietter's Water Garden) and Steve Stone (Comets to Koi)

Phone: Dietter's Water Garden 203-239-0128; Comets to Koi (203) 824-2018.

Hours of operation: Wholesale 8a.m-5p.m.; Retail on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday

Year Founded: Dietter's Water Gardens 1997; Comets to Koi 2001

Number of Employees: 4 full time; seasonally, up to 7 part time.

Sales Volume: About \$1 million per year

Average Sales Growth: about 24 percent

Size of facility: 5 acres; 12,000 square feet of greenhouse space; 5,000-square-foot fish growing pond and various display ponds

Services Offered: Pond installation, 95 percent residential; pond servicing; distribution of products; offers classes to garden centers about ponds, plants and fish; retail makes up only 10 percent of the business. the two businesses.

"What would it gain us to merge?" Dietter says. "It's nice that we run our own businesses because it forces us to be successful. If we were partners, one of us could say, 'I'm taking next week off, you run the show.' We feed off of each other in order to make each business grow."

Both companies rely on great customer service to keep long-term customers and help build business relationships, Dietter says.

They build complimentary display ponds for their water garden retailers, hold free water gardening seminars for customers, and will even install state-of-the-art fish holding tanks at cost.

"If a garden center is not going to post profit in their department, they're going to get rid of it," Dietter says. "The more we can help others make water gardening an enjoyable and rewarding experience, the more we all win."

Stone guarantees his fish to his wholesale customers, because he visits each of Located in North Haven, Conn., Dietter's Water Garden and Comets to Koi share the same property, while running separate businesses.their stores every week to test the water. On several occasions, Stone has replaced fish at no cost when a garden center has accidentally killed all of their fish, even when the center was obviously negligent. It's the price of staying in business, Stone says.

Empowering Employees

The other key to their success is hiring and maintaining good employees, which Dietter says is the most difficult part of the water garden business.

When Dietter was growing up in the industry, his father didn't share any financial aspects of the business with his employees. Dietter learned later in business school that this practice is contrary to popular theories for keeping a business afloat.

"We used to have a flower shop in our garden center and the florist would look at the retail value of the floral arrangements they produced," Dietter says. "My father always complained about how we had to cut payroll, but the florist is thinking about how she made this guy \$800 today. I told my father to let them see what he was Marginals, aquatics and hanging baskets line a greenhouse at Dietter's Water Garden, which offersone-stop shopping next door.spending on insurance and utilities. The employees should know what the bottom dollar is, how well the company is doing, and where it wants to go."

Dietter says empowering employees can help motivate them to grow the business.

"If I can help my employees be more successful, then I'll be more successful," he says. "It's not about giving them more money-it's about teaching them what business is all about. This winter I hope to fine-tune my financial reporting because I want them to see our profit and loss for the year. I want them to understand what I deal with everyday instead of just

barking orders at them. I want them to come to work and know that they are directly responsible for the success of the company."

Ultimately, what drives Dietter and Stone is their passion for the business-one for plants and the other for fish. At the end of the day, those are the things that matter most to them.

"There's nothing that makes me feel better than a customer that comes and says that I should see the fish that they bought from me last year," Stone says. "The funny thing is that they ask me if I remember their individual fish. We move 50,000 to 60,000 fish a year! But it's nice to hear the success stories."

Nikki Moustaki is an occasional contributor to WGN. Her last article, "Educators Reap the Benefits," appeared in the May 2005 issue.