

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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## Out of the Shadows

*Ellen C. Wells*

Life has a way of doing what and going where it pleases, and oftentimes its plan and path are unknown to the person living it. Take the life of Dawn Wilson, for instance. She was perfectly happy to begin her career as a schoolteacher. Thirty-some years later, she received the 2016 Lowe's Lawn & Garden Innovation Partner of the Year Award on behalf of Nature's Way Nursery of Miami, the company that began as a side job in the 1980s. So how did Dawn and the Miami-based wholesale nursery she built from the ground up get from Point A to Point B?

One acre and one deal at a time.

### A growing start

To her credit, Dawn wasn't only a schoolteacher. She was the daughter of a man in the tree-growing business. And like any good farm kid, she helped out when she could. It's where and when her love for plants blossomed.

So a year or two into Dawn's teaching gig, when the property managers of her newly purchased condo saw the great work she did installing her own garden, they suggested she put in a bid for designing and installing the others. And she got the gig. Dawn was a full-time teacher and weekend landscaper, and she loved it.

"I made pretty good money at it," she said with a smile during a recent interview. She picked up other landscaping jobs, too, and continued life happily.

But remember, life has further plans for us, and life had further plans for Dawn. When her father fell ill and needed her assistance, Dawn took a year off from teaching to operate his tree farm. At this point in our interview, Dawn's mention of teaching dropped off significantly until it was clear she had made the switch to landscaping and eventually to growing full time. She started with 1 acre, where she'd grow some of the items she needed for her own landscaping business and purchased other items from the folks who excelled in those crops. Other landscapers would also come to her for products. Eventually her nursery increased to 5 acres, then 20 acres.

During that time, Dawn toyed with the idea of operating a retail garden center. She soon realized it was a better deal for her to buy in plants and sell them by the dozens to other landscapers than it was to sell them in

onesies and twosies to the public. The garden center idea was put to the side and Dawn continued to grow as a wholesale supplier—and not just to landscapers. By the late 1980s, she had started supplying plant material to the chains. And in the aftermath of 1992's Hurricane Andrew that devastated her farm (which she rebuilt with passion), as well as South Florida, landscaping really took off. And so did Nature's Way Nursery of Miami.

*Pictured: Nature's Way Nursery of Miami founder Dawn Wilson (left) with vice president of sales and marketing Bea Garces.*



## Innovation nation

Twenty-odd years later, Nature's Way Nursery of Miami just may be the biggest southern landscape, tropicals and shrub nursery you've never heard of—and Dawn has liked it that way. But when Lowe's recognizes your operation as a Lawn & Garden Innovation Partner of the Year, don't expect to be in the shadows for much longer.

Lowe's specifically bestowed the award to Nature's Way Nursery of Miami for "bringing rare live goods products exclusive to Lowe's," according to a press release. With the wide sweep of horticultural history, how does anyone find anything that's "rare" anymore?

"There's just so many different angles when it comes to locating truly new varieties," says Bea Garces, vice president of sales and marketing. She says it can be as simple as finding interesting plants while you're driving around or as complicated as finding them globally.

"We also work with laboratories and liner partners and ask them constantly for new and different," Bea says. She adds that some of the "rare" is up to nature, like their variegated alocasia, which they just happened to find in the greenhouse. "That was Mother Nature's gift to us; you just have to pay attention to it when it happens."

When it comes to innovation, sometimes it's not just about finding new plants, but using the plants you have in

different ways. For example, Nature's Way Nursery of Miami is encouraging the use of typical Floridian tropical landscape plants—like bromeliads—as patio plants or as landscape annuals in the more northerly areas of their Southern Coastal shipping region (Texas, the Gulf States and into North Carolina). They've worked with Monrovia to introduce tropical varieties into that program, which tend to skew toward varieties appropriate for more northern climes, and these have become a big part of the brand's offerings.

"We're trying to educate the consumer that, for example, the bromeliad can be placed as an annual anywhere in the northern areas and it'll last from spring to first frost," Bea says. The key, Bea says, is to offer varieties that are grown for outdoor use and are hardy, unique, easy and low maintenance.

## Solving problems with combos

Finding what works together and solves multiple problems is what's driving the business' container combination program. Consumers unfamiliar with tropicals might stay away from using them, but put them in a container and the customers are suddenly more open to the possibilities.

"We've found that if we create a combo for the consumer, make sure it's appealing to the eye and ship it out in an upgraded pot, the response has been amazing," Bea notes.

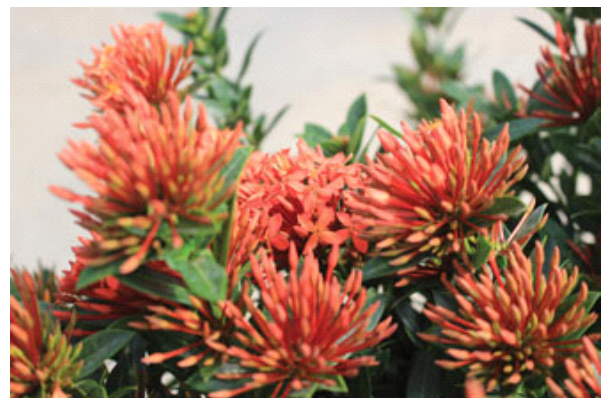
The most obvious customers for these combo containers are Millennials.

"Let's get them started and successful with their tropical combos so they'll want more," says Bea. "And when they are familiar with the tropicals and combinations, then maybe they'll ease into a little tropical landscaping."

But let's not forget about their parents, the Baby Boomers. "The more you speak to Boomers, the more you realize they are aging," Bea says. "They can't get on their knees anymore, and gardening isn't as easy as it used to be for them, so when they see a finished pot that is decorative and they can bring home and not have to create themselves, that's a benefit." Offering these combos at a few different price points again opens up the product to a wider audience.

## Nothing but network

Of course, none of the company's success would be possible without the strong network of more than 20 grower partners Dawn has formed over the years. While Nature's Way Nursery of Miami grows about 75% of their own product—and are considered the hands-down experts when it comes to ixora—Dawn and her team have a clear sense of what their network partners grow extremely well. It's one of her secrets to offering only the best and freshest product possible.



*Pictured: Dawn and the growers at Nature's Way of Miami have the "Coca-Cola formula" for growing their signature crop, ixora; i.e., the ingredients might seem simple, but no one else can duplicate it.*

What prevents those network partners from bypassing Dawn completely and offering their products directly to the big-box retailers? Nothing, really. Except Dawn's own areas of expertise, which are logistics, flexibility and, most importantly, working well with and anticipating the needs of the big boxes. Those retailers really only want to work with one business and go to a one-stop shop, Dawn explains. Big boxes have gotten extremely sophisticated in the way they do business. The demands they place on their own vendor partners have become much bigger over the years. Dawn's strength is that she knows how to work with them and meet those demands. And because she does, her network partners are loyal. In essence, why deal with the all the fuss of demanding big boxes if Dawn knows how to handle them herself?

Dawn is eager to praise her grower partners and team, and freely and easily gives credit where credit is due, but also clearly sees her strengths as a leader of people. This surely is part of the reason she's become so successful. But we might also attribute Dawn's success to the fact that she's a strong, smart and passionate woman in a business that skews heavily male. Women run companies and do business differently. And with all things that are "different," there's greater opportunity for pushing boundaries and to say, "Well, hey, let's try it this way." Which is exactly Nature's Way. **GT**