

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

4/1/2018

Inspiration, One Plant at a Time

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For some people, a life in horticulture is simply a career choice; for others—like Nancy Hart, founder of Church Creek Nursery in Johns Island, South Carolina—it's their destiny.

Nancy's adventure in horticulture began during a brief interlude between college and graduate school when she took a job at a local nursery. It was here that she discovered an untapped passion for plants, so she shifted her career from graduate studies in psychology to a life-long career in horticulture.

Nancy didn't want to simply work at a nursery; she dreamed of having a place of her own—a dream that she shared with her then husband, Brad, who was a landscaper. The couple began to look for a plot of land in Charleston, South Carolina, that would eventually become both their new home and business. Several years later, they stumbled upon an extremely rugged, heavily wooded plot on Johns Island in Charleston County. Church Creek Nursery was founded in 1989 with the development of two greenhouses and a shade structure on this unique spot of paradise.

Little did they know, their newly built paradise was about to be tested by Hurricane Hugo. With wind speeds up to 108 miles per hour, Charleston was ravaged after Hugo decimated several homes and businesses in the local area. However, the newly built structures withstood the high wind load, so Nancy went on a mission to help infuse color back into the homes of their region.

"One of my fondest memories after Charleston was struck, and it was devastated, was delivering mums to a small local hotel," said Nancy. "People flocked to the hotel; they were so excited to see color again."



Originally, the customer base for Church Creek Nursery consisted of 50% local gardeners and 50% landscapers. The company adapted to address the needs of its client base. For the landscape clients, Nancy wanted to ensure that she could offer unique, innovative plants that they could introduce to their clients' homes. For the drop-in customers, Nancy created a space where they could comfortably wander through the beautiful displays to pick the plants that would work best for their home. Over the years, Church Creek Nursery added Charleston's public gardens to its client base, providing beautiful plants that residents and

tourists alike could enjoy.

Pictured: Nancy Hart (far left), founder and retiring owner of Church Creek Nursery in Johns Island, South Carolina, with new owner Blanton Sheorn and employees Beverly Soles, Patty Franken and Gabrielle Hunt.

In 2002, Brad and Nancy separated. Brad made the decision to leave the business and return full time to landscaping, and Nancy took full ownership of Church Creek Nursery. For her, the nursery isn't a job; it's become a part of who she is, providing plants, education and inspiration to the local Charleston community.

Over the years, Nancy has developed quite a plant collection, including a beach primrose, several varieties of calla lilies, gingers and at least 12 different palms.

"In the last five years, I really got into succulents," she said. "I think in a past life, I must have lived in Bali or somewhere hot. I love tropicals, the variations in their foliage and their boldness; they don't disappear into the background."

There's no doubt that Church Creek Nursery introduced several new plants to the Charleston area, including lantana, hardy tropicals and exotic ginger. A few years ago, Nancy delved into the world of native plants, initially promoting the plants for ornamental use.

"I was concentrating on ornamentals because they were what I found pretty," said Nancy. "Today, customers are actively seeking them out, both for the native plant movement and to grow pollinators."

The climate of the region is primed for these exotic plants—although technically a Zone 8, the coastal environment creates a climate that's more akin to a Zone 9.

Infinitely curious about new plants, Nancy would often bring some new species home during her travels, which she would experiment with at home. She discovered her niche, supplying locally grown color to independent growers and landscapers in her region. Over the years, she made it a personal mission to consistently nurture high-quality plants for the region, while providing new varieties to pique landscapers' curiosity.

Today, about 75% of Church Creek Nursery's clients are landscapers and retail garden centers.

"We still have a lot of foot traffic, people coming in to see the products," said Nancy. "I wanted to make sure that there was always a friendly face here, (and) a good quality product that is locally grown and reasonably priced."

Fast forward to the summer of 2017 and Nancy was looking to retire.

"Originally, my manager was going to buy me out, but the deal fell through at the last minute," she said. "And so, I started sharing with a few key people my intention to sell the nursery. Blanton Sheorn heard about it through the horticulture grapevine and approached me."

A graduate from the University of Georgia, Blanton originally approached Nancy over a decade ago as a grower. At the time, Nancy was fully staffed, so Blanton developed his career at Metrolina, where he became the head grower.

"I'm thrilled to be able to hand the reins over to somebody that is youthful, well versed in social media and is equipped with the education and experience to continue to grow the business," said Nancy.

For those who are looking into starting their own business, Nancy stressed the importance of developing your own niche in your local market.

"Find out what is lacking in your area and provide to your customers something that they can't get at the big box store," said Nancy.

In fact, Nancy attributes this focused approach, in conjunction with not being financially overextended, to being one of only two nurseries in their region that survived the recession.

As she ventures into retirement, Nancy is filled with optimism and an adventuresome spirit, looking forward to travelling and discovering new plants to bring back home. Her hope is that by releasing the reins of Church Creek Nursery, Nancy can return to her own garden and indulge in her love of plants. For now, she's working with Blanton to help with the transition of taking over the business.

Overall, Nancy shared that her journey in horticulture has been an ultimate pleasure.

"I have customers who were single women when they first started to come in," said Nancy. "Now, it's their children, the next generation, coming in and taking over their family's profession."

On the cusp of retirement, it seems only fitting that this winter would present another weather challenge to Church Creek Nursery, blanketing the entire region with 6 inches of snow.

"Last winter we had maybe two days where the temperature dipped below freezing for the night," said Nancy. "There will be a new chapter on hardiness after this winter." **GT**

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