

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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### terrain, A Year Later

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The news spread quickly across the floriculture industry: Pop culture retailer Urban Outfitters (also parent of Anthropologie) was getting into the garden center business. Imagine how cool and trendy it will be! They're sure to show us all a thing or three about retailing!

Has their first garden center, terrain at Styer's (yes, with a trendy lower-case T), lived up to its hype? To find out, we walked the Philadelphia-area store the week before Mother's Day, one year after the grand opening, casting a critical eye on the facility alongside managing director John Kinsella, to see how terrain stacks up against the industry's best garden centers.

#### **Bad news first**

For those hoping Urban Outfitters would take garden retailing to a new level, we're sorry to disappoint you, but terrain is just a garden center! It's a very nice one, but it has warts, just like every garden center we've ever visited. It's not the shining beacon of retail perfection that some in our industry seemed to hope it would be.

Nor was it ever intended to be. Rather than start a sleek new business from scratch, UO purposely bought an existing garden center—a 100-year-old one at that—for its character, experienced management, services and customer base. But along with those virtues, the crusty old facility brought problems that simply couldn't be fixed, due to building and zoning restrictions.

For instance, parking stretches around two sides of the business, requiring two entrances—one nearer the nursery area and one nearer the cafe and home store. Despite signage, we were confused as to which entrance to use.

"We've had to make the best of it," John says of the dual entrance issue. But, he adds, "depending on which way you come in, you're still going to have a good experience." Both offer unique vistas and products, he says. And we'll admit, other respected retailers, such as Roger's Gardens, manage with two entrances.

Relative to the two entrances are multiple cash register locations. A customer can buy a product in one building then wander through the rest of the business, shopping bag in hand ... casually dropping in unpaid

items, if they're unscrupulous. John seemed unconcerned, saying shoplifting hasn't been an issue, and that terrain would want the service offered by multiple registers in future stores. '

"But just one main entrance and exit would make life a lot easier," he admits. "And it would help us control the experience, too."

Restrooms are another inherited challenge of the old Styer's. There are two, in separate, secluded locations, and both are unisex facilities. John told us they couldn't be upgraded due to the septic system. Better signage would guide customers to them more quickly, but we did note that employees were prompt to personally lead customers to the nearest one. Once there, customers raved over how "cute" and "fun" they are.

"We get that all the time," says John. "'Oh, your restrooms are so clean,' or 'You have really cool lamps.' That sends a message about the brand. Our employees know that every single interaction, and every aspect of the brand, says something. They're empowered to do what it takes to make sure customers have a good experience."

The most notable area terrain could improve was the ground and floor surfaces. It's mostly gravel, some of which had eroded away to leave trip hazards where wood edging was now exposed. Recent rain left it muddy in spots. Even the beautiful greenhouse café has a gravel floor. We asked if customers minded getting their expensive shoes dirty.

"We decided to go with [gravel] from an aesthetic standpoint," John answers. "It hardens up pretty well. But you know, that's part of the experience. They don't mind getting their shoes a little ...." He then turned to the nearby Allison O'Connor, terrain's general merchandise manager for a supporting opinion.

"Allison, do women mind getting their shoes a little muddy here?"

"Honestly? Yes," she replied. "But I think people know they're coming to a nursery."

"I think they feel like they're part of the experience, and I think it makes sense to them," John reasoned. Still, a combination of concrete and pavers—typical garden center surfaces—would improve movement and accessibility.

### **Now the good news**

Terrain is as beautiful and interesting as you've heard. The natural, recycled barn board aesthetic fits into the marketplace perfectly. (John says each terrain store will have its own look based on its environs.) And the product mix, both live and hardgoods, is high quality—and in the case of hardgoods, unique. The visual merchandising is as good as you'll find anywhere.

While a feast for the eyes and loaded with merchandising ideas you can steal, terrain is, at its core, just another really nice garden center. It's not a portrait of the garden retailer of the future. In fact, with recycled barn boards, an old glasshouse, an ancient mushroom barn and gravel underfoot, it offers much of the feel of a classic old nursery ... something today's harried consumer probably appreciates.

The proof, of course, is in the financials.

“We’re doing really well right now,” John replies when asked how business has been. “We’re actually having a very good year this year. We’ve got to prove that this model can be successful to Urban Outfitters, that we’ve got a brand they can invest in. We have a plan, and we’re doing really well this year.”

UO founder Richard Hayne is “delighted,” he adds. “He’s talked about how the response we’re getting from customers now is similar to the kind of response they had at the first Anthropologie store, in Pennsylvania. And that encourages him greatly. I’d say overall he’s pretty happy with how things are going.”

Despite what outsiders might think, Richard is not just a rich guy who’s playing in the garden center business as a hobby, John says. “He’s an unbelievably smart guy. He’s in the top-tier of retailers in the country right now. He is passionate about gardening. But he wouldn’t invest in it if he didn’t feel strongly about the business.”

So when will we see terrain No. 2?

Answers John with a smile: “We’re looking at other locations right now.”