

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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### Growing Naturally

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In 1965, with a landscape architecture degree from Colorado State University, Tom Bath started his landscape business in Fort Collins. The trees that were planned for the landscape jobs were his best advertisement, when passersby continually asked to buy them. The requests were the momentum for expansion at the present location.

Bath Garden Center and Nursery became a retail operation that sold outdoor plants and fertilizer. By the 1980s, Tom grew annuals and vegetables. Today, Tom and his daughter, Sara Bath Salzman own the business, which encompasses a retail and wholesale nursery, garden center, power equipment sales, irrigation service, snow removal and hydroponics, as well as the landscape division. Jobs include residential and commercial landscape projects such as designs for hospitals, apartment complexes and car

dealerships.

pictured: Tom Bath started his landscape business in 1965, which quickly turned into a growing and retail operation called Bath Garden Center and Nursery in Fort Collins, Colorado.

The bedding plants, poinsettias, herbs, fall mums, cyclamen, perennials and vegetables are grown in 50,000 sq. ft. of indoor space in addition to 2 acres outdoors. Carly Firme, marketing director, has been with Bath Garden Center and Nursery for five years. She says Tom has never been a fan of chemicals or pesticides. The Bath family has always grown its own food and eaten organically. Carly says, "As organic gardening products became more available and cost-effective for the home grower, Tom jumped at the opportunity to educate customers about organic gardening."

At Bath Garden Center, the plants and the food are grown naturally using organic or natural soils and fertilizers. They use the term "grown naturally" as they don't have USDA certification for organic labels. Trees and shrubs are purchased from other growers.

Marie Yap is the perennials grower, and Carol Hedstrom is the grower of bedding plants, poinsettias and an entire array of vegetables, including 30 varieties of tomatoes and peppers, and 10 varieties of melons. Carly

says Carol, who has been with Bath Garden Center for 15 years, has developed relationships with customers over time, and they feel comfortable enough to tell her what they've had success with in their gardens and what doesn't work for them. The garden center grows plants for alpine living in Hardiness Zones 4 and 5.

Fort Collins is about 65 miles north of Denver and 45 miles south of Cheyenne, Wyoming. It sits in the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains at a 5,003 ft. elevation. The city has approximately 145,000 people. Carly says their customers come from Fort Collins and Cheyenne, Wyoming, as well as many of the smaller towns in the area. Customers range in age from 30 to 70-plus. She adds, "Fort Collins is a college town and environmentally conscious; the majority of our customer base is interested in natives and water-wise plants."

As a year-round retail and wholesale business, Bath employs about 100 people during the peak season, and has 30 trucks. The employees attend bimonthly meetings to be briefed on new products and gardening info. "There is quite a bit of competition from other nurseries and growers in the area," says Carly. Although, she adds, "Everyone is friendly about it." What sets Bath Garden Center apart from its competition is that they've found their niche in the town and they attract the customers from their immediate area.

The classes and events at Bath Garden Center are alternate ways to bring in new customers. The originators of National Zucchini Day on August 8 encourage gardeners to leave zucchini on neighbors' porches. Bath Garden Center invited people to bring in their largest zucchini. The owner of the largest zucchini of all the entrants receives a \$50 gift card.

Bug Day is a three-hour love fest of winged and multi-legged creatures. Kids bring in their favorite bugs, plus they get to touch the bugs that entomologist Dr. Mike Weissmann brings with him. Berry Fest, Kiwanis Club Garden Club tours and fairy garden birthday parties are other ways they attract customers. Carly says they used to have a major event once a month, but they've pulled back on them. "The events drew crowds, but did not translate into sales," she adds. The Fall Fiesta and the Oktoberfest are two events to clear out the trees and shrubs for year-end sales.

Tips for other growers:

Carly suggests making time to talk with your customers. "Get out of the greenhouse and from behind the scenes; ask customers what they want," she says. "If you're a wholesale grower, volunteer one weekend at a garden center to help customers pick out plants and gauge their responses—what they want isn't always what you want." She adds that enthusiastic gardeners want a lot of variety in their bedding plants and vegetables.

Bath Garden Center and Nursery opts for square pots to maximize and organize their growing space. They do use 4-in. round pots for veggie starts to prevent tangling; and they're easier for the customers to grab, she says. **GT**

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