

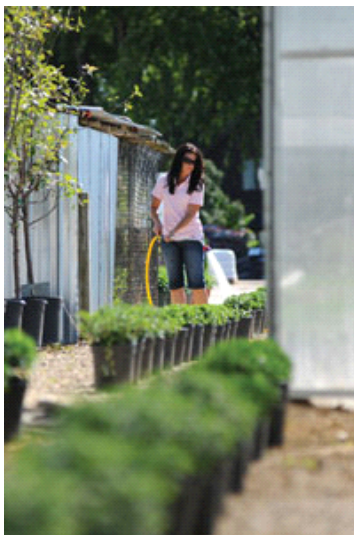
GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Forward Progress

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If anyone has a crystal ball, please give Nancy Gambino a call. She'd like to borrow it.

It's the one thing she needs to meet one of her biggest challenges with running the growing/retail operation she owns with her husband Joe—Arte Verde Garden Center in Poplar Grove, Illinois. And that's predicting what her customers want every spring.

"This year, orange could be the hottest thing and, then next year, I buy orange in every different variety that's out there ... and then the new color is black," said Nancy. "That's one of the frustrations with growing, not knowing what the next trend is going to be."

Sure, owning your own business comes with many challenges, but Nancy has learned it's how you face those problems that determine your success.

From penthouse to greenhouse

Nancy's horticulture background was learned at the School of Hard Knocks. Her degree isn't in horticulture and she didn't grow up in a greenhouse business owned by her family. Everything she knows about growing a quality plant came from reading loads of hort books and learning on the job.

Nancy and Joe opened Arte Verde in 2003, but during the five years prior to that, Nancy worked for The Strategic Coach—a company that helps existing entrepreneurs maintain balance in their personal and professional life. She consulted with more than 360 business people from all over the world, traveling and learning about different industries.

While she was jet setting around the world, Joe was working for a local landscaping business. The travel and chaos of her job was starting to become tiresome, so Joe suggested they open a garden center and landscaping business of their own. A love for gardening and designing her own containers was already something that Nancy was well acquainted with, so Joe's idea wasn't that far-fetched.

To get their feet wet, Nancy and Joe started working at a local garden center on the weekends and during their days off. After a year, they knew they wanted to be part of the horticulture family. The garden center where they were working was closing its doors, so the Gambinos bought 12 greenhouses from them and moved to 11 acres of land owned by Joe's parents in Poplar Grove, near the Illinois/Wisconsin border. For a full-blooded Italian Chicago girl, it was a big change.

"It's wild because I used to deal with all of these high-end people who stay at the Four Seasons and I would shop in Beverly Hills and then here I am in Poplar Grove," Nancy says with a laugh. "When people heard I was opening up a garden center they were like, 'What is she doing?' Even my parents thought Joe and I totally lost it because we had really good jobs and we just decided to make a huge change."

They hit the ground running. For the first two years, the Gambinos were figuring out the details of owning a growing, retailing and landscaping operation. They have some scars from a few wrong turns and some good intentions that went south. But Nancy isn't the type to leave the past in the past—one thing she learned from working at The Strategic Coach, called The GAP business strategy, was to take both the good and bad experiences and use them to keep her business moving forward.

"Don't measure the progress going forward, measure it backwards," she explained. "Take a look at where you came from versus where you want to go and how much you didn't accomplish. When I feel like this year I want to make X amount of money or I want to finish X project, instead of stressing about what I didn't achieve, I take a look at how far I've come. It's really helped me get through everything and keep up my confidence."

"Green Art" niche

It took them three months to decide on a name for their new garden center ("Green Art" in Italian) because Nancy really wanted to stand out in a town that was rapidly growing, which was one of the reasons they decided to move farther north. "The Poplar Grove area was booming [in 2003]," said Nancy. "They were building homes like crazy. And there really wasn't another garden center close by."

As word spread about Arte Verde Garden Center, the Gambinos began to collect a loyal customer base—some coming from as far as over an hour away to walk through their 5 acres of retail space and production. What keeps them coming back? Nancy says one reason is their specialty 12-in. hanging baskets.

"I go based off of what I think grows well together and people love the combinations," she said. "They can't find anything like these anywhere else—like the local high school colors because everyone has graduation parties and wants their local colors. I try to be really focused on what they would want, what would really attract them to buying my baskets versus the same Proven Winners mix in another garden center 10 miles away. And I put a lot of plugs in them so that way they're very showy and huge."

Arte Verde's selection of perennials is another reason why people travel to the Gambinos' garden center. Nancy works with multiple suppliers to help her stock popular varieties and the hard-to-find stuff. She estimates they offer about 500 different perennial varieties and she grows about 90% of them.

"I have a lot of oldies, but goodies. It's just one of those things that helps me differentiate myself from the big box stores," said Nancy.

And as with many independents in the industry, Nancy keeps a close eye on the competition with the big box stores. But she doesn't have to worry as much because she feels Arte Verde offers a variety of products and services that the big boxes don't—like their large amount of vegetable plants. Nancy said they have 36 different varieties of tomatoes, 27 varieties of peppers, plus loads of novelties.

"I just try to have things that you can't find," said Nancy. "Most of the vegetable plants I do I buy in and then I'll grow some of the really rare stuff from seed that nobody will grow because not enough people will buy it."

Arte Verde also has a large "selection" of animals for visitors to admire and to entertain their children while they shop. The horses, donkeys, bunnies, chickens, etc. came with the property, as Joe's dad owns most of the animals. But the menagerie has helped draw more people, who in turn pick up a plant or two while they're visiting.

Many of Arte Verde's empty nest and retired customers also take advantage of their landscaping service. Nancy says about 25% of their business is landscape, which is the part that Joe is heavily involved in. His previous experience has helped carve a place for Arte Verde among the other local landscaping companies that may be a tad cheaper, but don't offer the same service package that you get from Joe and his team.

"Joe is more selective as far as who he works for because it's important for him to be on the same page as the homeowner since his work is his business card," said Nancy. "We don't just mow and leave, so it's a full service company. Joe has about 10 customers that he maintains all year long and they keep him busy all year long. He doesn't want to have 1,000 customers."



Completing the 360

Beyond the "normal" marketing tactics, Nancy promotes Arte Verde by being extremely active in her community and donating to local charities. Philanthropy has always been near and dear to Nancy, so now when she volunteers her time, she also offers containers and centerpieces—and she makes sure that people know where they came from. (At press time, she just donated 34 centerpieces to a local golf club for a breast cancer charity outing.)

pictured: Nancy Gambino with her family. (From left) Nancy, her daughter Lucia (4 1/2), Gerry the cat, her husband Joe, and her son Mario (20 months).

"Even in college, I would volunteer at hospitals and I always felt that so much has been given to me," said Nancy. "I've been so blessed in so many ways, it's so rewarding for me to say, 'I'll help you out.' What comes around, goes around so I'm just completing the 360, I guess. I feel like it benefits the business. We get our name out there. I'm getting free advertising, and hopefully, new customers. So what, I need to give 10% of my sales? Fine. It goes both ways—it works for them and it works for me."

Fortune telling

Now, Nancy and Joe have a growing business (they've since added two more greenhouses) with no plans of slowing down. She has big plans for Arte Verde as they move forward, like growing the wholesale part of her business. They don't do a lot of it—she grows hanging baskets and supplies plants for the cities of Rockford and Beloit, Wisconsin—but she'd like to open that up to all of the surrounding towns in the area because it adds more guaranteed sales to their bottom line.

Another future endeavor is to add a fall attraction to their facility, which Nancy hopes will happen within the next two years. The garden center usually closes around mid-October, but offering interests like pony rides, and a haunted house will extend the season and bring in more sales.

For peak months in May and June, visitors may soon be able to sit and have lunch in Café Verde or Piazza Verde ... Nancy hasn't decided on the name yet. Joe once owned an Italian deli, so his experience will help once they figure out the budget.

"I would say within the next five years," Nancy says when asked when her café will be operational. "Honestly, customers are here for hours because we're so large. I have the space, but the time and the funding I'm working on. We'll either have specials for the day or we'll do lunchmeat sandwiches. And of course, Italian gelato." (Because Nancy says it's almost impossible to find good gelato out in the country.)

While Nancy's working on all of these future projects and handling the production and running the garden center, she's also raising two small children—Lucia, 4 ½ and Mario, 20 months. Thankfully, she has help from her family and a local daycare provider to help, especially during February and March when she works seven days a week during peak production time. Plus, one of the perks to owning your business is that any day can be Bring Your Children To Work Day.

Ask Nancy

Opening a growing operation and garden center from scratch while juggling a family and philanthropic commitments provides a crash course in many of life's lessons. So, what would Nancy tell other young people who have dreams of opening their own garden center?

"Set realistic goals for yourself and start off small. But do it!" Nancy stated. "Start learning about it on the weekends at farmers markets and garden centers and get knowledgeable about the first 50 varieties you're going to offer people and expand slowly. Don't just open—open to differentiate yourself. Find your niche and be a specialist in something. If that works out for you, then expand slowly into other areas. And always measure your progress backwards; don't fall into that GAP."

Nancy doesn't have any regrets with starting Arte Verde. The first two years of rapid expansion and learning on the go was a lot to handle, but now that they're in a groove and are maintaining a successful business, Nancy and Joe continue to come up with ways to keep the momentum going. They always have to be mindful of what their customers want, but at the same time be cost-conscious even when trying new methods like being more sustainable.

"Even though I'm growing on a much smaller scale, we can't be wasteful. We really have to be in touch with what's the newest and hottest that they're advertising in magazines because it's typically what people want

the next season,” Nancy said. “We really need to know what’s going on out there and what’s being marketed. You can’t always go based off of last year because they may not want what was hot last year. We really need to look at using what we have to keep costs down. There are so many ways growers have to take a look at things, like cutting corners without having to sacrifice the quality of the plant, because nickels add up in this industry.” **GT**