

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Building a True Garden Center Destination

Anne-Marie Hardie



Belgian Nursery owners Rosie and Luc Lombaert (left) with their daughters Julie Clancy and Rosemary Galivan (right).

The horticultural industry for some families has evolved to much more than their primary source of income. For these families, growing has become an essential part of their lives—something that feels as natural as eating and breathing. Maurice Lombaert was bitten by the growing bug in Belgium, where he spent his days breeding dahlias. However, Belgium

was not meant to be the forever home for the Lombaert family. Over the years, three of the Lombaert's daughters had moved to Ontario, Canada, so Maurice, his wife Mary, and his young son Luc decided to join his daughters and take the long journey overseas.

Like many immigrants at the time, Maurice spent the first few years taking on several odd jobs, from construction to random jobs, to simply make ends meet. During these years, he worked and saved enough to purchase a small piece of land. It was on this land where Maurice was able to see his dream grow into fruition.

"Growing was in the blood, and so when they bought that parcel of land, he immediately went into the field and started growing," said Julie Clancy, granddaughter of Maurice. This was the humble beginning of Belgian Nursery. The year was 1959 and the Lombaert family had once again launched into horticulture, cultivating their own cut flowers and perennials to sell at the local market.

Today, Belgian Nursery has evolved to a specialized garden center. An exclusively retail business, the family is still deeply invested with growing their own plants, including an acre of annuals, 8,000 hanging baskets, select perennials, fall mums, cactuses, tropical plants and even papayas.

“We occasionally play with some fun stuff like papayas. My sister has a couple that come in for the winter and go out to her house in the summer,” Julie said. “Occasionally, we like to experiment, drying the seeds of the papayas and planting them.”

As the years went on, Maurice and Mary’s son Luc (Julie’s father) became deeply in-volved with the family business. But it wasn’t until he married his wife Rosie that the real changes to Belgian Nursery came about. Rosie had a vision to convert Belgian Nursery from your typical garden center to a shopping destination. This conversion began with shifting the focus to primarily retail, Julie said, with her mother adding in fresh cut flowers and arrangements for weddings and funerals.

“My mother made it more into the shopping experience for customers that it still is today,” said Julie. “It began with building the main store for all of the gardening décor aspect.”

In the midst of the story of Belgian Nursery, there have been a lot of changes and renovations, shared Julie, all which were focused on specializing and making Belgian Nursery a shopping experience. Part of this unique experience includes a 5,400-sq. ft. cactus house that’s accessible to customers year-round.

“The idea of a cactus house came from my mom. I’m not sure if it was a dream of hers or she came back with the idea from a vacation,” said Julie. “But all of her ideas seem to start with a scribble sketch on paper and then we expand from there.”

From January 24 to February 24, Belgian Nursery promotes their winter products with their annual cactus festival, providing people a mini escape in the harsh winter months. Within the house are large display gardens, with thousands of cactuses to sell year-round, encouraging customers to take a piece of warmth home with them.

“The house has become a destination for people to visit, especially in the winter months when it’s crazy cold outside,” Julie said. The displays provide that much-needed break during the gray days of winter, providing a mini getaway for the customers who are unable to fly to a warmer destination.

Horticulture has always been a part of Julie’s life. She fondly remembers playing hide and seek among the greenhouses and making flower “stews” with old or broken cut flowers.

“I knew from when I was little that I wanted to continue working with plants,” Julie added. A true family business, in 2001, Julie took over the ordering of the annuals, including managing the employees and mapping out the floor plan. Her sister, Rosemary Galivan, also is an active participant in the business, managing more of the retail side, including retail staff, tropical plants and ordering the hard goods.

Although their focus is mainly on the garden center, the Belgian Nursery family are still avid growers, nurturing plants throughout the year.

“We start our hostas in July for next year’s crop, primula in September and October, and once January/February hits, we are back into spring planning,” Julie said. Open year-round, Belgian Nursery draws

customers into the doors during the cooler season with their Christmas products, which includes artificial Christmas trees and decorations, and their three tropical-inspired greenhouses of cactus, houseplants, orchids and other tropical plants. To provide that seamless shopping experience, each of the greenhouses are connected, with customers being able to see the different eras of the business throughout their shopping journey.

More than just plants, Belgian Nursery is also the home of small lizards, a cockatoo and a green winged macaw to engage the children and the child within each adult. And for those customers who want to know more about growing, Belgian Nursery produces an in-house magazine with articles crafted by their own staff. More than just prices, this magazine provides their customers with tips and ideas on how to create their own growing experience.

Belgian Nursery's vision of the future is to balance family time with cultivating a specialized destination that consumers will gravitate towards.

"Spring is very busy regardless, so having that flexibility is important," said Julie. "We want to continue being a unique place, where we change certain items or products throughout the year, or according to the market needs." From dahlias to a destination experience, Belgian Nursery continues to evolve with the needs of today's consumer, showcasing the love of growing from three generations. **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.