

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Falling in Love with Ferns

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Equipped with a master's degree in special education, Eleanor Craig—owner of Fern Ridge Farms in Cedar Bluff, Alabama—was perfectly positioned for a long-term career as a teacher. However, a summer job with a landscaping company set the stage for a dramatic career shift.

“When I told my mother that I was leaving education and a stable job for landscaping she thought that I had lost my mind,” shared Eleanor. “But once you have the soil under your fingers, it’s hard to get it out.”

Pictured: Eleanor Craig, owner of Fern Ridge Farms, is known as “the

Southeastern Fern Lady.”

It was her love and curiosity for ferns that carved out a niche in horticulture and developed a passion into a thriving business. Over the years, Eleanor has exhibited and spoken at conferences, special plant shows and master gardener events, connecting with individuals who were curious about ferns and their vast possibilities.

“It still amazes me when people think that ferns are designed to grow in baskets on your front porch,” said Eleanor.

Eleanor's horticulture journey began with managing the lawn maintenance division for a local company in Georgia. It was here that she learned the ins and outs of the business and developed the required skills to break out on her own. Four years later, Eleanor left the security of working for others and launched her own residential lawn maintenance and landscaping company, Country Garden Grounds Service and Nursery.

It was the early '80s and the beginning of the perennial craze. As a landscaper, Eleanor was often called in to help clean up gardens and remove the quickly expanding perennials. However, instead of disposing of the perfectly healthy plants, she brought them home.

“It didn't take long until I had pots and pots of divided perennials,” said Eleanor. “I knew that I had to do something more with these excess plants.”

Having a degree in special education primed Eleanor to learn patience, but she truly didn't learn patience until she started growing.

“You don't rush nature,” said Eleanor. “They are going to grow on their own time.”

Eleanor began selling her perennials to different garden centers, which helped streamline her inventory while providing an additional source of revenue. After 10 years in the landscaping business, Eleanor took the leap and

focused solely on growing.

“After many tears, and a lot of blood and sweat, I’m proud to say that I survived,” said Eleanor. With the help of family and friends, she developed her Georgia property to respond to the needs of her growing business, including grading the land, erecting greenhouses and running electricity and irrigation.

Turning a new leaf

Eleanor’s venture into the world of ferns began when one of her Atlanta clients requested holly bushes for under her window.

“They wanted something knee high,” explained Eleanor. “I was still fairly new to the fern world, but I suggested the Japanese Holly Fern. It looked absolutely fabulous.” (Decades later, Eleanor was thrilled to discover that these ferns were still thriving.)

News spread of the “Southeastern Fern Lady” and her passion for ferns, resulting in a request to become an exhibitor for the Southeastern Flower Exhibit. It was a game changer. Immediately, Eleanor saw how curious consumers were about ferns and she decided to venture into the retail market.

One of the things Eleanor loves about retail is that it permits her creativity to flourish. “I can let two plants grow together and customers will gravitate towards it,” said Eleanor.

It was during one of these initial Southeastern Flower Exhibits she noticed a sign that stated, “Don’t touch the plants,” which she quickly took down.

“The fern is all about the textures and it’s incredible variations; why do you need blooms when you can have all of that?” said Eleanor.

In 2004, Eleanor renamed her business Fern Ridge Farms, reflecting the diversity of ferns that she grew and gathered for both the wholesale and retail consumer. It’s the fern’s versatility and beauty that continues to entrance Eleanor, emphasizing that there seems to be a fern for almost every condition. Today, Fern Ridge Farms is home to over 70 varieties of ferns.

Self-described as her “fern babies,” Eleanor travels the world researching and collecting new varieties to nurture back at home.

“One of the hardest parts about growing plants is letting them go,” shares Eleanor. “In fact, when I start to get low, I start going into a bit of a panic mode.”

The years haven’t been without their challenges, including coping with broken pipes to working with bugs and extreme heat.

“It all goes in line with the loveliness of this business,” said Eleanor. “You are fighting nature, but the rewards are great.”

Recently, Eleanor made the decision to move the business from the hustle and bustle of Atlanta to the quiet countryside of Alabama. The move resulted in scaling back Fern Ridge Farms from six greenhouses to two.

“I thought I was scaling back, but there is really no such thing,” said Eleanor. “One of the hardest things about growing is not to grow.”

Her Alabama home is just a few minutes away from the nursery, which allows Eleanor to easily do regular check-ins while also accommodating customers who are looking to make a special trip out to the Farm. “I’m there every day

unless I'm on the road doing sales," said Eleanor. And her website has helped draw additional clients into the operation, with Fern Ridge Farms offering shipping to those customers who aren't able to make the trip out to Alabama.

For anyone looking to venture into growing, Eleanor's advice is to stay focused and not try to be the biggest business out there. By staying small, Fern Ridge Farms was able to successfully manage her business and adapt with the shifts in retail. But perhaps more importantly, it helped ensure that the focus remained on producing quality plants.

As the Southeastern Fern Lady, Eleanor continues to share her passion for these diverse plants throughout her community and beyond. **GT**

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