

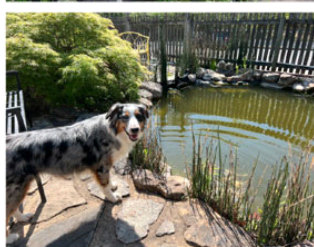
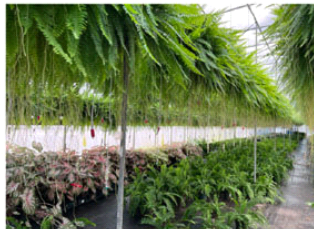
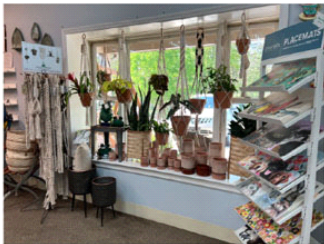
GROWERTALKS

Features

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A True Destination

Jennifer Zurko



Nestled atop scenic Signal Mountain at the southern edge of the Cumberland Plateau just north of Chattanooga, Tennessee, Signal Mountain Nursery is the definition of a destination garden center. It's worth all of the white-knuckled hairpin turns you have to make in order to trek up the mountain to pay them a visit.

Third-generation owner Kim Bonastia took over the nursery with her husband Mark in 2014. When it was first opened in 1947 by Kim's grandparents, Arthur "Scotty" and Ben Addie Parry, it was known then as Parry Nurseries, whose specialty was wholesale peonies. After a bad year of nematodes, they switched to daylilies. Kim's mom Laurel and dad David joined the business when Scotty passed away in 1975, and they started growing liners to sell wholesale. They had too many, potted them up and started selling finished product. That's when the name changed and the retail side of the business began.

Pictured: Signal Mountain Nursery offers lots of unique and interesting container options for their customers. Owner Kim Bonastia visits AmericasMart in Atlanta every year to get ideas and bring back trendy finds for the gift area. • As a real destination garden center, Signal Mountain Nursery has plenty to keep their guests entertained while they're shopping for plants, including this 30-year-old bonsai, which is the centerpoint of their main retail greenhouse. It's not for sale, but Kim said people come to "visit it." • A popular summer item at Signal Mountain Nursery is the beautiful fern baskets. • Luna stops to smile next to the Koi pond that's a favorite with Signal Mountain Nursery customers.

Today, Signal Mountain Nursery grows all of its own annuals and about 80% of its perennials. They bring in all of their houseplants, shrubs and trees.

Growing & Expanding

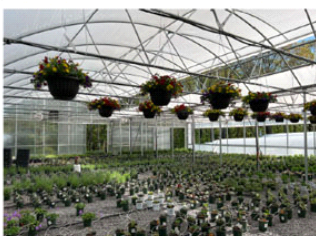
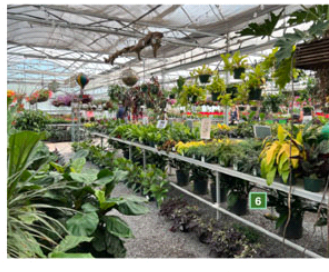
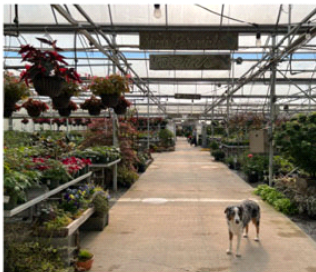
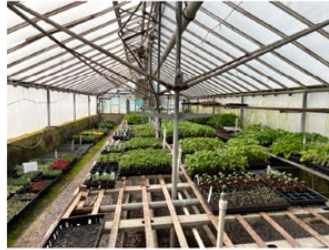
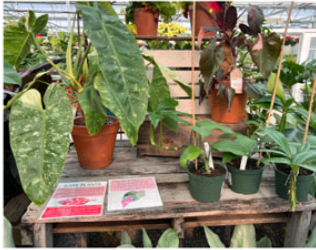
Every category of plants is well-organized, so it's easy to shop. From the gift area at the front (where the cash wrap is also located), traffic flows into the retail greenhouse where you can go right for houseplants; left for grasses,

tropicals and perennials; and straight for annual containers and hanging baskets. Kim and her team create different vignettes and displays to showcase their different products and they change them up seasonally.

When I visited Signal Mountain Nursery in late April, Kim and her staff were very busy restocking product and helping customers. Even with increasing her prices, they were working hard to keep up with the demand.

Signal Mountain Nursery pretty much sells any size plant, from large custom containers to flats—which are still popular. Impatiens Downy Mildew significantly affected sales of flats for a while, but with the newer, more resistant varieties, sales are starting to creep back up a bit. And Kim grows flats of other crops and those continue to sell well.

“People do like buying flats,” she says. “They feel like they’re getting more plants for the money.”



Signal Mountain Nursery does a big business with houseplants—so much so, that Kim is looking to expand the area. They hold a special houseplant event every February and offer quite a few rare specimens, including this Philodendron José Buono on the left that retails for \$900. • Signal Mountain Nursery is very well-organized and an easy place to shop. Luna, Kim’s Australian Shepherd, is a good tour guide. • In 2020, Kim built a brand-new Stuppy greenhouse just for perennials production. • Signal Mountain Nursery still uses some of the original greenhouses that were built on the property, including this one that’s over 50 years old, where they grow cuttings and veggie starts.

One area that’s experienced significant growth is their houseplant section—so much so that Kim has been eyeing an area that currently holds patio furniture as a possible space to expand.

For the last three years, Signal Mountain Nursery has held a houseplant event in February where customers

can come in, participate in workshops, check out rare varieties and buy plants. This past year, they made kokedamas.

“People come from all over,” Kim says. “And many of them bring their families and make a day of it.”

Houseplants aren’t the only part of Signal Mountain Nursery that is expanding; in 2020, they built a new Stuppy greenhouse specifically for perennials production. And they’ve planted another U-Pick flower garden, which will be the second year that visitors can come to Signal Mountain Nursery to hand-pick zinnias, celosias and other cut flowers to make their own bouquets.

To be a true “destination garden center,” there have to be multiple reasons for people not only to come, but to stay, and Signal Mountain Nursery has that in spades. Not just the picturesque drive up the mountain and the high-quality plants, but all of the details in making their customers feel like they can stay all day. And, luckily for Kim, Mark and their team, they do. **GP**