

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Reconnecting with Nature

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Just outside of Winter, Wisconsin, is a garden center destination with stunning perennial display gardens that are designed and nurtured by a team of individuals passionate about nature and its beauty. Winter Greenhouse, which was named after the community it placed its roots in, was established in the late 1970s when perennial gardening was still in its infancy.

The garden center began as a small bedding plant business serving the local community of 300 people. Jim Wilson, who's one of the founding members, brought his knowledge of science and biology to the table.

"Initially, we had no money, really; just a lot of inspiration, hard work and love for what we were doing," said Jim. "We had a natural interest in living things and so a greenhouse felt like a perfect fit."



Pictured: Jim Wilson is one of the founders of Winter Greenhouse in Winter, Wisconsin.

The land in Northwestern Wisconsin was initially purchased as the gathering site for a religious practice based in yoga and meditation. It was here that the group learned some of the members had a background in horticulture and the idea for Winter Greenhouse was born.

The initial greenhouse was a success—so much so, that the group decided to expand into the nearby town of 3,000 residents, adding a second hoophouse to their operation. From the very beginning, the nursery stood

apart from others in the industry, offering unique perennials and annuals to their local customers.

Consumers were naturally drawn to Winter Greenhouse for both the variety of plants available and the service they received at the garden center.

"We had a lot of different things—unique annuals, tropicals, trees and shrubs," said Jim. "The catalog just kept getting bigger year after year."

Over the years, Winter Greenhouse continued to expand, adding additional greenhouses and eventually branching out into display gardens. It was the display gardens that evolved the company from a garden center into a gardening destination where customers could come in, wander and simply appreciate the beauty.

“At first, the display gardens were simply to test out new material that we wanted to grow,” explained Jim. “At the time, there was limited supply of market perennials; it was the mid '80s. And so we decided to put together a catalog of the hardy perennials, including the ones grown in our display gardens, and offer them to the community.”

Today, Winter Greenhouse's large circular gardens each have their own theme to showcase the plants' potential and provide an attractive feature for individuals to meander through and simply absorb its beauty. However, today, customers aren't just asking for certain plants within the gardens, but are requesting Winter Greenhouse to create a customized landscape for their own homes.

“Our customers' needs and interests are constantly changing,” said Jim. “Our annual sales, which were at a record high over the last few years, have now levelled off. Today, our customer base is extremely interested in landscaping.”

The display gardens not only piqued interest in certain plants, but also carved out an opportunity for Winter Greenhouse to offer their landscaping services for their customers.

“People are coming in and seeing our display gardens and asking for us to do it at their own homes,” said Jim. “We learned how to make designs using PRO Landscape and other software systems.”

The response from the landscaping division of their business has been incredibly heartwarming.

“Our crew is very personable,” said Jim. “They take the time to connect with each of their clients and help develop the gardens of their dreams.”

On the other end of the spectrum, Winter Greenhouse has helped nurture the miniature gardening trend, providing their customer base with both the tools and techniques to create miniature displays. The interest in these fairy gardens, shared Jim, has truly taken on a life of its own. So much so, that Winter Greenhouse has created a separate website and online shop exclusively for their miniature garden division. Here, customers can browse through an extensive selection of plant material and accessories, and purchase them directly online. As an additional benefit, the miniature gardening niche has expanded both Winter Greenhouse's consumer reach, while also extending the selling season.

One of the goals for Winter Greenhouse is to draw consumers to their locations during the off-season. One of the ways that they do this is through their Bonus Bill Days in the early spring. On these days, customers are handed out a \$1 coupon for every \$10 purchase made. These coupons can then be redeemed during the month of July for up to 50% of plants they purchase.

From the very beginning, the garden center strived to become a vibrant member of their community, providing an outlet for customers to not only purchase their own products, but simply experience the beauty of gardening.

“It is an incredible community that has been very supportive of us over the years and we are eager to find ways to

support them back,” said Jim.

Early to late summer is also when the greenhouse schedules any major events, taking the opportunity to both thank the community for their continued patronage, while also drawing them into their location. This year, Winter Greenhouse is launching “Art in the Garden,” which will showcase music, artwork by local artists and food throughout their gardens. Guests will be encouraged to wander through the gardens, immerse themselves in art and simply appreciate both the beauty and design. This event is one of the ways that Winter Greenhouse expresses their thanks to their supportive community.

When it comes to the future, Winter Greenhouse hopes to provide both the service and products that will continue to inspire their community.

“We would like to keep going for at least another 40 years,” said Jim. “We love simply connecting people with nature and its beauty. Living in touch with nature can be extremely uplifting.” **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.