

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

7/1/2019

### Creating a Space for Plant Enthusiasts

Anne-Marie Hardie



Nestled in Stillwater, Oklahoma, is a nursery that prides itself on introducing unique and unusual plants to the local plant enthusiasts. Led by Steve and Ruth Owens, Bustani Plant Farm is a space that shares information, encourages exploration and brings passionate individuals together to share their common love of plants.

A self-professed plant geek, Steve may have acquired his plant enthusiasm from his grandfather.

“He had plants that other people didn’t even know about,” shared Steve. “I remember seeing his garden and thinking it was really cool.”

*Pictured: Ruth and Steve Owens, owners of Bustani Plant Farm.*

However, it was his position at a landscape company that piqued Steve’s curiosity about plants and their potential for a career. Driven to explore the industry further, Steve enrolled in some evening courses at Oklahoma

State University and quickly discovered that there was so much more to learn. It was around this time that he applied and began working for the City of Tulsa at an established garden that housed a variety of unique plants.

“I realized that I was fascinated by both the art and science in landscaping and wanted to explore this industry further,” said Steve.

He left his current job to pursue a bachelor’s degree at Oklahoma State, which was quickly followed by a Masters in Horticulture. Equipped with information and full of ideas, Steve was eager to put his education into action, but he wanted a hands-on position that would allow him to explore his passion for gardening. The perfect opportunity arose just after Steve’s graduation, which he immediately applied for and received—a State Consumer Horticulture Specialist with the cooperative extension service at Oklahoma State University. Steve was presented with the opportunity to write, produce and host a how-to gardening television program focused on Oklahoma Gardens. The position not only allowed Steve to explore the diversity in Oklahoma gardens, but also helped position himself as a trusted horticultural authority.

During this time, he met and married his wife Ruth, who also worked at the university. Although happy with their current positions, they were intrigued by the idea of creating a nursery space that was uniquely their own. Steve dreamed of creating a shopping environment designed to meet the needs of plant geeks. Extremely business-

mindful, Ruth's organization and attention to detail provided the form and structure for Steve's vision.

"I'm so thankful for my wife and her management skills; I really think she is one of the main reasons that our business is successful," said Steve. "She provides the structure that ensures that everything gets done on time, and when plants arrive, they have both their place and price."

The couple launched into the project, building their greenhouse, sourcing unique plants and spreading the word about their new venture.

Their nursery, Bustani Plant Farm, began in 2005 while both continued to work at the university. By the third year, they both left their respective positions at the university to operate the business full time.

"We grow unusual and unique plants—things that you don't find in other garden centers," said Steve. Over the years, they've collected plants from around the world, including Kenya, Argentina and Morocco, which they bring back and test in their Oklahoma garden before selling it to their customers.

Due to the widespread interest, Bustani Plant Farm launched a mail-order division in 2008 that immediately attracted a huge following from hummingbird enthusiasts.

"We did the mail order for four years and only opened the retail operation on the weekends," said Steve. However, their weekend traffic continued to increase, so they decided to shift away from mail order to operate a five-day-a-week retail operation. Today, Bustani Plant Farm is open Tuesday to Saturday for eight weeks in the spring and five weeks in the fall.

"We try to open after the last winter frost, typically mid-April until it gets too hot," Steve said. The remainder of the year is spent sourcing new plants, growing them and organizing the upcoming year's catalog.

Although they don't formally do mail order anymore, there are still a few botanical gardens on the East Coast who have remained loyal customers, including the Smithsonian, the United States Botanic Garden and Chanticleer. These loyal customers order their selection through email, which Steve then loads and personally transports to their gardens.

"It's a two-day drive out there, but I enjoy doing it and seeing those incredible gardens," he said.

Recently, Bustani Plant Farm added education to their offerings, including constructing a 110-capacity space for gardening classes and workshops. The building opened in the fall of 2018—just in time for the launch of Bustani Plant and Garden Festival, which included guest lectures, garden workshops and shopping.

"Ruth and I always wanted to have an educational component to our nursery," said Steve. "This year's guest speaker is Smithsonian's lead horticulturist Janet Draper."

Last year's conference sold out quickly, so Ruth and Steve decided to extend this year's conference to two days.

"Each day will have the same lectures and lineup," he said. "The second day simply opens up the conference to more individuals."

One of his favorite aspects of their space remains the display gardens, which showcase some of their favorite plants, including providing an opportunity to introduce the public to new varieties. These gardens feature mainly herbaceous plants, perennials and annuals, including tropical annuals, and several native and foliage plants.

"I love that we've created a nursery for folks like me that want something different that will also perform well in their garden," said Steve. **GT**

*owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.*