

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Merging of the Minds

Anne-Marie Hardie



Pictured: Pine Hills Nursery offers annuals, perennials and hanging baskets to their local Mississippi community. n Pine Hills Nursery has evolved from a typical retail shop into an education center and horticulture destination.

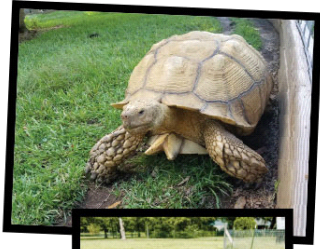
Located in Pass Christian, Mississippi, Pine Hills Nursery is a third-generation, family-owned garden center that's evolving into a horticulture destination. Today, the business invites families to wander through the grounds, exploring the different animals and enjoy the beauty of the stunning flowers.

"The nursery was inspired by two generations: Loraine, my grandmother, and Polly, my mom," shared Rachel Bond. "They worked together to develop their joint love of horticulture into a thriving business."

The passion for flowers was sparked by Rachel's great-grandmother, who worked for a local florist.

"My great-grandmother worked at Adams Loraine Florist for several years," said Rachel. "In fact, she named her daughter, Loraine (my grandmother), after the florist that she worked for."

Young Loraine would often spend time at the florist while her mother worked. It was this early experience that fostered a love for horticulture and sparked the dream for her future business.



Lorraine's dream was ignited when her son Mike introduced her to his girlfriend Polly (Rachel's mother). Polly had worked at a wholesale nursery since the age of 18. It was here that she learned the intricacies of the business and discovered her love for plants. Over the years, Lorraine and Polly shared their passion with each other, eventually sparking the idea to launch their own business.

"My mom was learning about the wholesale side, my grandmother knew about the flowers and they had the property for a new business," said Rachel. "It made sense to bring these passions together and open their own business."

Pictured: In recent years, Pine Hills Nursery has added animals for the public to enjoy, including goats and tortoises.

Pine Hills Nursery opened in 1986, the year before Rachel was born. The business began with one greenhouse, where they grew their own bedding plants and nursery stock, which they grew outdoors. They initially sold their plants to the wholesale market, supplying landscapers and nurseries.

Over the years, the family has slowly shifted the business from wholesale to retail, inviting local customers into their space.

"We have a lot of land, which provides us with the opportunity to try out different materials," said Rachel. "We dabbled in shrubs when I was a kid, but in the end, we decided to leave the shrubs to the nursery growers."

Today, they continue to focus their attention on greenhouse plants, including annuals, perennials and hanging baskets.

"We like to start growing our annuals early so that they can be fairly large in the spring," said Rachel. "Our perennials and Proven Winners hanging baskets are just a few of the things that we do that set us apart."

For years, the family would travel to local garden shows in the spring, selling their bedding plants throughout New Orleans.

"We would pack up a trailer and go to different garden shows in the area," said Rachel. "But today, we prefer to bring our customers into our retail store."

A true family business, Polly and Mike manage the daily operations and care for the animals. Rachel, who's branched out to add floral and event planning to Pine Hills Nursery, reflects on how she was able to bring her grandmother's dream of having a flower shop to life. Her hope is that she can help take some of the weight off of her mom's shoulders so that she can retire (or at least decrease some of the hours that she invests in the business). Rachel's husband Ashton is also involved in the operation when he's not working as a firefighter. Even Polly's sister, Sherrie Massey, has become involved in the business, handling orders and managing the office.

Their new vision for the business involves transforming it from a retail shop into an education center and horticulture destination. This transition was a natural one, as Mike and Polly discovered that they also shared a passion for animals, so they slowly introduced new animals to their location.

"They love adding new animals and features to improve the entire area," said Rachel.

Pine Hills Nursery is currently home to rabbits, guinea pigs, chickens, miniature goats, tortoises, koi, doves, partridges, parakeets and even an iguana. The facility also includes picnic tables and seating areas, encouraging families to wander and linger. These new features encourage shoppers to explore the ground and enjoy the facility.

The company also offers birthday parties that can either be self-hosted or include an activity (fairy garden/dinosaur garden) put on by the staff at Pine Hills Nursery.

Education also has become a strong component of the nursery, including instructing seminars themselves or bringing in experts from the local university to speak about common gardening challenges.

“Our hope is to get people out here to enjoy the space, plants and animals, and while they are here, perhaps share some knowledge that will help increase their confidence with gardening,” said Rachel.

Customers also love coming in and chatting with Polly, the resident expert, who happily shares the knowledge that she’s acquired over 40 years in the industry.

This past spring and summer, Pine Hills Nursery became a haven for individuals seeking a safe space to wander outdoors and learn about growing.

“There was an increased interest in a lot of vegetables, herbs, citrus and fruit trees,” said Rachel. “People wanted to invest in something that would give something back to their home.”

It was a year where entire families became involved with their gardens, planting outdoors together and making their spaces beautiful. Rachel’s hope is that this is a routine that will continue even after the fear of the pandemic has lifted.

When asked about what’s led to the continued success of the business, Rachel shared that it’s about cultivating a space where people can ask questions and develop a passion for gardening.

“From the very beginning, my dad has shared that we are here to solve people’s problems,” said Rachel. “We don’t just sell to sell, we want to help our customers, teach them about gardening and help them be successful.”

Their hope is that by creating this beautiful destination they’ll inspire others to bring plants and trees into their home.

“We want to be a plant resource, but more than that we want our customers to like gardening and be successful at it,” said Rachel. “Our hope is to cultivate gardeners and a love of gardening.” **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.