

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Growing New Roots

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In the city of Gering, Nebraska, located in the heart of Scottsbluff County, the recently launched Dirt Stix Nursery has taken root. The nursery opened its doors in March 2021, providing the community with a beautiful, open space to appreciate and purchase high-quality plants.

At the heart of this nursery is Megan Tower, whose passion and drive made it possible to develop, build and open the business in less than a year.

"When I turned 20, I started working at a greenhouse—Aulick's TLC in Scottsbluff," said Megan. "I thought that it was just another job. But I fell in love with it and have been working in the industry ever since."

In the beginning, her role at TLC involved a lot of grunt work. She was taught critical tasks, like watering, would only be allowed after she'd worked there for a few years. Megan was committed to learning everything she could about the industry and soaked up all the information her mentor, Miles Imel, shared. It didn't take long to discover the nursery industry came naturally to her, sharing that she was shocked at how easily she

was able to remember the vast amount of information.

Pictured: Dirt Stix Nursery owner Megan Tower, with her fiancé Nathan Helibrun.

"It's not just about the plants," said Megan. "I love helping people feel successful with their gardens and seeing that transformation from our first discussion to that day when they come back and exclaim that 'it grew.'"

Megan remained with TLC for eight years until the company closed its doors and she was faced with the decision of continuing in the industry or returning to her original career path.

She applied to a speech therapist position at the local elementary school, applying the skills she learned in college.

However, she was struck by the fact that, although she enjoyed working with the children, something was missing. She missed being immersed in plants and the world of growing, so she left the school to return to the world of horticulture.

In the meantime, Miles had just started his own business, Peaceful Prairie Nursery in Mitchell, Nebraska, and Megan approached him about returning to work in the nursery.

“The minute I walked through those doors I had a feeling that this is where I’m going to be for the rest of my life,” she said.

She continued to work with Miles for several years, applying her skills to help the community discover plants for their homes. When that journey came to an end in 2020, Megan struggled to find the next step in her career.

“I was sitting at home wondering what career was going to make me happy. I enjoyed customer service and the retail aspect, but I didn’t want to venture into the restaurant industry,” she said.



She began to explore the concept of opening her own business and designing a nursery that responded to the needs of the community. It was May 2020, amid a global pandemic, but that didn’t stop Megan from constructing a business plan and putting the pieces in place to launch a nursery.

Pictured: Dirt Stix Nursery in Gering, Nebraska, opened its March 1, 2021, just 10 months after owner

Megan Tower decided to open her own garden center.

“Our community needed a place to buy local trees and perennials—the municipalities and schools were going to Colorado to buy all of their stuff,” she said. “I wanted to keep it local as much as possible and give our community a one-stop-shop for all their gardening needs.”

The location for the nursery would be in Gering, Nebraska, which was accessible to both the residents of Scottsbluff and the surrounding areas. The plot of land had an existing building that would be used for the foundation of Dirt Stix Nursery, resulting in the final design of an 800-sq. ft. showroom and a 10,800-sq. ft. open-design greenhouse.

The construction work began in the fall of 2020 as Megan prepared for a Spring 2021 opening. There were moments where she thought it seemed impossible. (The heating unit, for example, was installed just four days before the spring plants arrived.) However, Megan was committed to opening the doors to the local residents for spring.

Dirt Stix Nursery opened its doors on March 1, 2021, just 10 months after the idea was germinated. Opening early allowed the community to become a part of the progress and recognize that this space was created for them.

“I’m still a little terrified, but I’ve had so much support,” said Megan. “I’ve been doing this for so long, people in the community know my name and everyone is just really excited about having a place here.”

The vision for Dirt Stix Nursery is to provide products and information to help set the gardeners up for success. This includes stocking healthy plants that will thrive in the Nebraska area, Zone 4 or less, and sourcing local whenever possible.

“We are strongly focused on the health of the plant, including the root structure, so that when customers place their plants in the ground they will be set up for success,” said Megan.

The trees and shrubs are currently brought in from Sester Farms in Gresham, Oregon, where Miles currently works.

But the goal is to eventually use the unused acreage to grow Dirt Stix Nursery's conifers and perennials.

The customer shopping experience was a primary consideration when designing the space. Dirt Stix Nursery used pallet racks, which were cut to 30 in., to place all of the greenhouse plants. This design choice provided a stable, accessible space (no products are on the floor) for consumers to shop.

"I wanted people to walk into this one, big, greenhouse and see everything and each other," she said. "It's been a wow factor so far."

Although still in its first season, Megan has mapped out plans for the entire year, including bringing in poinsettias and potentially converting the space into a winter farmers market during the off-season.

"We still want to be a part of the community in the winter season and our enclosed space will provide lots of room for individuals to sell their products," she said.

Starting a business from ground zero in under a year was far from a simple task, however, one of the key things that Megan learned was the importance of not underestimating yourself.

"I'm still in shock on how fast and how amazing it is. I was undercutting myself a bit on my capabilities, but it's beautiful." **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.