

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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The Transformative Power of Houseplants

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The last few years have shown a renewed interest in houseplants, bringing the younger generations into the folds of gardening. However, in West Bloomfield, Michigan, the Pliska family has transformed homes and businesses into stunning indoor living spaces for the past five decades.

“Our story is a multi-generational one, but it is so much more than that,” said Shane Pliska, second-generation president of Planterra. “It’s about how we have evolved and adapted over time. Our company today differs from when it first began at the historic farm site five decades ago. Every decade we tend to reinvent ourselves.”

Pictured: Original business partners of Planterra (left to right): Andre Bond, Stephen George and Larry Pliska.

The last five decades have seen Planterra, which includes both Planterra Corporation and Planterra Conservatory, become a staple in the West Bloomfield community.

The journey began 50 years ago when founder Larry Pliska, who was working as a manager of a local plant store, was informed that the business was about to be foreclosed. The shop owner offered Larry his houseplant inventory in lieu of his final paycheck. It was 1973 and houseplants were coming into their own, so Larry, seeing an opportunity, accepted the inventory. Andre Bond and Stephen George joined Larry as business partners in the new operation, which included investing in a greenhouse to house the stock and develop the new business.

It was the birth of Planterra Tropical Greenhouses, Inc., an operation that would continually find new ways to bring indoor plants into the lives of the West Bloomfield community. During the first decade, the company was invested in understanding not only the potential in houseplants, but the needs of their community.

“We are really in touch with the fabric of the community,” said Shane. “One person told us we had a ‘love brand;’ there is an emotional connection with our community.”

Larry’s creativity and entrepreneurial spirit provided the ideal combination for this unique business model, and he quickly realized that this business was a perfect foundation for a family operation. So 10 years into the journey, he

decided to buy out his partners and run the business with his wife, Carol.

The couple began the next leg of their journey by purchasing a property in West Bloomfield, including a greenhouse built in the 1930s. The new location retained the name Planterra Tropical Greenhouses and became an interior landscaping company selling plants to local greenhouses and retailers, and designing commercial spaces and high-end residential locations.

“Over the years, we have had the privilege to help develop beautiful interior spaces for major events and several prominent figures in the West Bloomfield community,” explained Shane. “We are far from the typical houseplant location; instead, we take pride in stocking unique tropical plants and trees, and then using them to create stunning interior designs.”

Over the next 30 years, the interiorscaping operation continued to evolve as the Pliska family explored innovative ways to bring plants into the lives of people in their community. This included developing living walls, stunning designs for atriums, holiday exhibits and interior plantscape installations. Their growing understanding of the needs of their community and indoor plants provided the ideal foundation for the next iteration of their business, the Planterra Conserva-tory. The interiorscaping side of the operation is truly their legacy business, where the Pliska family has developed decades of institutional knowledge.

“It’s a niche specialty and we are among the few retail firms with the knowledge and staff to do it well,” said Shane.

The conservatory project began in 2009, with the re-development of their 1930s greenhouse space. The result is a lush, glass-enclosed space resembling a botanical garden, including indoor koi ponds and a stone gabion archway. The interior includes a collection of plants, some that are decades old, providing the community with a beautiful spot to wander and shop.

“We opened up to retail in 2010, right during the recession,” said Shane. “It was a challenge for us, and we kept getting requests to use our location for weddings, so we decided to start renting out the building.”

It didn’t take long to realize that they’d stumbled upon a positive business opportunity, and instead of outsourcing the services, the Pliska family decided to offer everything in-house, including the flowers, food and beverages.

“Our team is very strong on aesthetics,” said Shane. “This, combined with the knowledge that we have learned from experts in the production business, has helped to create a very good business model.”

Although accidental, the transition to event planning was an organic one and the ideal business model for the conservatory space. So much so that within two years, the company decided to close its retail operation to focus exclusively on event planning. The event planning operation provides guests with a turnkey experience, where Planterra controls all aspects of the experience, including food, alcohol, design, flowers, linens and valet services.

“The weddings we produce in our building are truly magical,” said Shane. “I still remember working the first wedding event with my parents and brother, and realizing the incredible space that we’ve created.”

Planterra has invested the last decade in refining its event-planning company to provide its customers with a memorable experience.

“2019 was truly a record-breaking year with both interiorscaping and weddings in high demand,” said Shane. “This year, we are finally seeing the demand for events and weddings return, with the event team diligently working to satisfy the pent-up demand.”

Today, both Larry and Carol have confidently left the business operation to Shane and his brother Zachary, while they enjoy retirement.

“Our father is a perfect illustration of an entrepreneur; although we have different approaches to problems, we share a passion and dedication that is unwavering,” said Shane. “It’s not just about the business, but the family and our identity as well. It’s all wrapped together.”

Larry and Carol have been highly supportive throughout the succession plan, coaching Shane and Zachary when needed, while also allowing them to put their visions into action. The transition to the next generation has brought forward the next evolution of the business.

Shane and Zachary’s goal for the next decade is to expand their interiorscaping business to a national level, while continuing to build the wedding and event business. This includes adding features to help transform their event planning space into a botanical garden site.

“Plants never go out of style and we do see a future in what we do,” said Shane. “People want to be near plants, and because of that, there is always going to be a place for these types of plant-centric experiences.” **GT**

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