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INSIGHTS FOR BUSINESS & LIFE



GARDEN PARTY

ENGLISH GARDENS HAS FLOURISHED FOR 60 YEARS
BY ADAPTING TO THE NEEDS OF ITS CUSTOMERS

plus:

BUSINESS STRATEGY ABEDNEGO MAKES A TURNAROUND
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GARDEN PARTY

ENGLISH GARDENS HAS FLOURISHED
FOR 60 YEARS BY ADAPTING TO THE NEEDS
OF ITS CUSTOMERS

BY ERIK CASSANO



L to R: Bob Walker, Business-to-Business Development Manager; Mike Grundman, Chief Financial Officer; John Darin, President; Dean Darin, Merchandising Manager; Lynette Walker, Merchandising Manager; Linda Yugovich, Merchandising Manager; Rick Vespa, VP Hard Goods Merchandising; Frank Janosz, VP Live Goods Merchandising

PHOTOS BY TOM MCKENZIE



Prior to World War II, most Americans didn't have the suburban yard space that has become commonplace today, so they didn't have a need for lawn care and landscaping supplies.

The post-war housing boom — which was only starting to take root in the suburbs of Detroit and other American cities — changed that. Over the next several decades, the country's population shifted from city centers and rural settings to the suburbs, and millions of people bought lots along tree-lined streets in rapidly expanding residential developments.

In the early 1950s, the lawn and garden retail space was barely developed.

As the suburbs grew in popularity, homeowners needed yard-care equipment. Everyone needed to spruce up their flower beds with annuals and perennials. And everyone needed somewhere to buy it all.

That was the future that John Darin Sr. bought into when he and two brothers-in-law — Henry Vespa and Andrew Donatiello — purchased English Gardens in 1954.

“At the time, it was a flower shop and produce market,” says John Darin Jr., who now runs the company as president. “But in a relatively short period of time, it evolved into gardening products. My father got us out of the produce business, because he saw how things were starting to trend.”

As the suburbs grew, demand grew, and English Gardens evolved into one of the first major lawn and garden retailers in Southeast Michigan, offering a full-service nursery and garden supplies.

“We've grown the business by responding to the needs of our customers,” Darin says. “That's always how we've done it. And it's served us well. Since 1980, we've expanded to eight locations throughout the region, and now there are seven of us in the second generation of the family who are working in the business.”

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

The original English Gardens business was founded soon after the conclusion of World War II and named after the then-owner. It was already a recognized brand when the families purchased the business in 1954, so they kept the name and continued building upon the established name recognition.

That decision was relatively easy compared with the decisions that followed. With new markets emerging in tandem with new residential developments across Southeast Michigan, what did they want the name “English Gardens” to mean to the countless new homeowners throughout the region?

To guide the development of the brand, the leadership team began to make customer relationships a foundational part of the culture of the company. Without fully understanding what the company's customers wanted and needed, English Gardens would struggle to grow, and ultimately, to survive.

“It was a lot of hard work that we put in over the years, taking the time to listen to customers, trying to understand their needs and the products they'd like to have,” Darin says. “If customers know they have a business out there that's willing to listen and carry what they need, you're going to develop strong loyalty with them. It's really not anything groundbreaking. You talk and listen.”

As the lawn and garden space expanded and evolved throughout the 1960s, the staff at English Gardens also worked to develop strong relationships with suppliers. Lawn and garden product manufacturers, greenhouses and other vendors would serve as the pipeline to the products that consumers wanted, so it was critical for the company to build bridges with them, as well.

“Those vendor relationships have served us well, particularly since the '60s,” Darin says. “That was when we really saw the first real explosion in popularity in gardening and landscaping. That's when flowering an-



nuals really started to become popular. We started to grow our business in that direction at a faster pace.”

As English Gardens grew, it was essentially blazing its own trail. There was no well-worn road for companies trying to expand in the lawn and garden space to follow. As English Gardens grew, it was drawing its own template for success.

“That was the real importance of building relationships,” Darin says. “We had nothing else to go on because there wasn’t an established template for our space. Everything we did was a product of us listening to our customers and using that knowledge to work with our suppliers to develop products to fill those needs.”

Those conversations led English Gardens beyond product sales. Over time, the company expanded into a wide range of services, including landscaping design and installation, and full-service floral departments in every store. The company also found a niche as a Christmas and holiday retailer.

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– JOHN DARIN , PRESIDENT, ENGLISH GARDENS

“We got into the Christmas space in the mid-’60s, and it really became a full-fledged part of our business by the mid-’70s,” Darin says. “Our natural busy season is late spring and early summer, when people do most of their big landscaping and floral projects. We were looking for something to balance out that season, so we looked at Christmas. It was a way to create business at what would have otherwise been a slow time of the year

for us, at the start of winter.”

Ultimately, the goal for English Gardens has been to create a unique place in the lawn, garden, floral and holiday shopping space. All of the conversations, listening and trailblazing that the company has undertaken over the decades have been with an eye toward creating a unique experience that will attract new customers and continue to draw repeat customers.



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“Our core business is really the DIY customer, the person who likes to create and get their hands dirty,” Darin says. “For them, our goal has always been to offer an assortment of products and services that is going to be difficult to find anywhere else.

“We have unique products that manufacturers now make and supply just for us. We’re also one of the largest regional suppliers of Proven Winners, one of the biggest premium brands for annual plants — all of that, and everything else we’ve done, is to make our shopping experience unique in the marketplace.”

FERTILE SOIL

English Gardens has been able to develop strong relationships with customers and vendors in large part because the company encourages and develops strong relationships among its own ranks.

In much the same way that company leaders have taken the time to get to know the wants and needs of customers, they have also taken the time to get to know their employees on an individual level. They have learned what the employees need to succeed personally, and how fulfilling both personal and professional needs plays a large role in helping the company succeed.

“Finding the best people for your team is something that challenges every business,”

Darin says. “It’s an ongoing responsibility. We have to find, hire and train the best people we can find. Without great people with great talent and knowledge of the industry, we can’t be a resource for our customers. We simply can’t deliver a great customer experience.”

When new associates start at English Gardens, they’re put through an extensive orientation program that teaches the basics of the industry and the particulars of the job. Employees are also periodically trained and retrained by product manufacturer representatives who make on-site visits to stores.

Once they’re brought aboard, new associates — be they managers, students working a summer job or anyone else — receive a supply of personalized business cards.

“Obviously, business cards provide a chance for our people to promote the store, but as much as that, it’s about having a sense of pride in our brand and image,” Darin says. “It’s about having a sense that the company views this person as a representative of our brand, and we want them to be our face in the community and our face to new and existing customers. We think it’s a very empowering message to send to our people.”

Experience has taught Darin that the customer-employee relationship is a two-way street. Great employees produce loyal customers, but loyal customers can, in



turn, produce great employees.

“Over the years, we’ve honestly found that our best resource for staffing is our customers,” he says. “A lot of people who work here were customers before we hired them. They loved the environment here, were fond of the people and came to work for us. We also have a number of people here who worked summer jobs for us as college students and decided to stay on after college and turn it into a career.”

Even those who didn’t stay provide a sense of gratification for Darin — high school and college kids who go on to careers in other fields but still remember the role English Gardens played in shaping them as professionals.

“I’ll be out in the community and people will come up to me and introduce themselves,” Darin says. “They’ll tell me how they worked at English Gardens while they were in school, and how it taught them about business and hard work. They’re successful people today, and we helped to play a role in that. That means more to me than just about anything else I could do in this business.”

FINDING A BANKING PARTNER

Another critical element in the success of English Gardens is a strong and reliable support structure. The long-term health of a business can hinge in large part on the

quality of its support structure, particularly when it comes to financial matters.

Recently, Darin and the company’s leadership team began searching for a new bank that would offer a higher degree of flexibility as it continued to grow. They found their match with FirstMerit Bank.

“We were looking for three main things in a banking relationship: simplicity, flexibility and availability,” Darin says. “FirstMerit was able to give us all three. They worked with us to come up with some creative banking solutions that fit the state of our company now and that will help us get to where we want to go.”

As English Gardens moves into its seventh decade of operation under the Darin and Vespa families, the company is embracing a selective growth strategy. Darin wants to open more stores and possibly expand the company’s inventory of products and services, but only if he thinks it’s a good match that presents itself at the right time.

“Looking down the road five years, I’d like to open another store or two,” Darin says. “But it’s going to depend on whether we think it’s the right opportunity and the right market. We’re not going to jump into something just in the name of expanding for expansion’s sake. We want it to be a good match for us.”

That’s why Darin appreciates FirstMerit’s ability and willingness to learn about every facet of his business. That knowledge is the reason FirstMerit has been able to craft custom banking solutions for English Gardens. Like most business leaders, Darin doesn’t want a bank that simply sells prefabricated product packages. He wants a bank that builds a comprehensive solution that fits his company’s needs.

“They really thought out of the box in creating their banking relationship proposal for us,” he says. “Their level of understanding about our business has created a trust factor between our organizations. They’ve given us more flexibility with things like loan repayments, because they can see we’re a family-run business that has been here for decades. They can see everybody here is committed to making the company as successful as it can be.

“In our 60-plus years of business, we’ve only changed banks three times. We’re looking for long-term relationships with our partners, and we believe that’s something we can have with FirstMerit.” ♦

For more information, visit www.englishgardens.com.