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Issue Archives

Home > Magazine > April 2007

- 2009
- 2008
- 2007
- 2006

Southern Homes & Gardens: A Fresh Approach

With a new store in Montgomery, Ala., this retailer is revolutionizing the mix of indoor and outdoor merchandise.

By **Bob LaRue**
 April 2007

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It's happening in a southern part of Alabama – a significant departure. The way garden and home products are mixed in the garden center retail setting is changing.

This new Southern Homes & Gardens store opened in June 2005 in Montgomery, Ala., 90 miles south of Birmingham and 160 miles southwest of Atlanta.

It's a revelation in how to combine upscale goods from both the home and garden categories. This store is evolving into a model for other garden centers to contemplate.



Russel Brown and Lamar Thompson from Southern Homes & Gardens

The first impression as one enters this newest of the firm's two units, is that this place is as inviting and tasteful as the Smith and Hawken store that opened in Palm Beach Gardens last year.

That's one way of saying that this Southern Homes & Gardens environment is open, bright and appears to be easy to shop. The structure for the new store was built by Private Garden, and features 16,000 square feet of covered, non-greenhouse retail space and 44,000 square feet of greenhouse selling space. The overall property totals 22 acres.

Treats To Tempt Customers
 Once the new store became open and operative, General Manager Russell Brown and his talented team dedicated themselves to a variety of tasks that ranged from tweaking to fine-tuning to major modifications.

One of the areas that was up and running full-tilt at the outset was the 46-seat café. Having visited most of the U.S. garden center food service operations, this writer proclaims this charming, efficient facility to be at least as good as the best in the country.

It not only pulls in shoppers and causes them to linger longer on the premises, but the pleasant surroundings, excellent menu and good service make the café a lunchtime destination for nearby residents and business personnel. As a consequence, there is added seating outdoors and in an adjacent greenhouse. Yes, those added exposures provoke merchandise sales, as well as positive word-of-mouth. Does its popularity cause parking problems? Not at all – there are a total of 153 parking spaces.

Since mid 2006, ongoing modifications have been underway throughout the property. The most impactful development was the extent of the company's commitment to an uncommon category of furniture. Certainly, it had been uncommon in garden centers. It is a collection of fairly large, heavy wood pieces: armoires, tables, chairs and hutches. These imports required about 2,000 square feet of floor space. That brought on challenges in placing other merchandise throughout the available indoor space. The good movement and good margins on the furniture helped dictate other, related decisions, such as presentation and

Southern Homes & Gardens

Owners: CCC Associates Co.

Location: Two stores in Montgomery, Ala.

History: Company started in 1950 as a floral shop.

Web site: www.southernhomesandgardens.com



product mix.

More Makeover Magic

While all of the above changes were going on at the "new store" (referred to as the Vaughn Road store), these developments have been unfolding elsewhere in the company:

- The original store, opened 27 years ago in another section of Montgomery, underwent an extensive makeover to bring it up to the level of the new unit. The original store has a lot of appeal since it is set among the growing grounds the firm has operated from the beginning. That undertaking covers 5 acres of outdoor space that sits on a 280-acre complex of growing fields, greenhouses and offices.

- Christmas at both stores is a major event that is dominated by decorative goods for indoors and outdoors. The past season was exceptionally busy and successful.

- This spring, the Vaughn Road store kicked off the spring season from Feb. 17 to 18 with a crowd-pleasing event called the Southern Favorites Home & Garden Show.

- About a year ago, management felt that it could be highly beneficial to be a member of the ECGC Group of leading garden centers. In addition to interfacing on a great many aspects of garden center management, Southern Homes & Gardens hosted a two-day conference last fall with all the members in Montgomery.

A Lasting Tradition

Southern Homes & Gardens is unique among America's garden center operations in terms of its ownership. An oversimplification is to say this is the retailing division of an international conglomerate.

Southern Homes & Gardens is a division of a firm started in 1950. CCC Associates Co. originally started as a retail flower shop founded by James Lamar Thompson. CCC Associates Co. now operates retail stores and oversees manufacturing of home décor products with its Caffco division.

Today, CCC Associates is still a family business. Lamar Thompson is the president, Russell Brown, nephew to Thompson, runs the retail operations and several other family members work in one division or another.

The Southern Homes & Gardens sector of the enterprise was established in 1979. Lamar Thompson Jr., observes:

"The management places emphasis on quality and trust: quality products and quality service to the customer, and trust between each and every person working with the corporation to perform his or her work in an honorable manner."

About the author:

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Plant Sales Q & A

What is the range of plants?

Everything from tropicals, bedding plants, evergreens to trees.

What do you grow?

We grow a variety of woody ornamentals, trees and seasonal color.

Which growers do you use?

We primarily use our own growing division, which is called Southern Growers, but we also buy from vendors like Monrovia.

Which are branded lines?

Endless Summer, Encore, Monrovia, Proven Winners, Plants That Work, Stepables.

How are they presented/displayed?

Plant items are displayed on flood tables and benches, as well as on the ground.

Describe the overall look of the plant presentation areas.

This has recently changed and is still a work in progress. We are mixing in more arbors, planters and statuary into our plant presentation. We are creating more lifestyle looks and showing how plants can actually be combined in a customer's yard.

Do the structures enhance the atmosphere in greenhouse space?

Any type of structure helps to give another dimension to the atmosphere. It gives height and makes your product look more appealing to the customer. It gives the customer reasons to explore your greenhouse and makes them excited to see what is around the next corner.

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