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A Step Ahead: Swansons Nursery

With a focus on teamwork, Wally Kerwin and his crew have transformed Swansons Nursery into a state-of-the-art garden center ready for the 22nd Century.

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For a man with a background in engineering and finance, Wally Kerwin has an impressive and deep-rooted passion for the garden center he bought as a business endeavor 30 years ago. But, he'll also be the first to admit it's been a challenging three decades.



"I backed into it just looking for my own business," he explains. "The garden center that was here looked like a great opportunity, and it was kind of like love at first sight. I was too naïve to know any better, but it is a great site and a great opportunity. In retrospect, it's been way more of a challenge and an uphill battle than I ever dreamed it would be. But, it's also more rewarding than anything I would've dreamed of."

Swansons Nursery, located on five acres within Seattle city limits, started in 1924. When Kerwin bought it in 1976, there were 11 parking spaces, and the annual revenue was about \$600,000.

"I didn't know just how difficult it would be to shift this into something that was state-of-the-art, but you can always find opportunity if you really look at it and have creative people who are lending support," he says. "It's evolved into a real first-class garden center, but it's nothing like what was here in 1976 – not by a long shot."

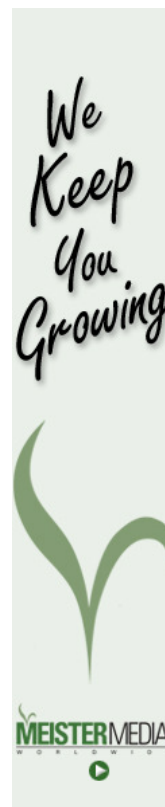
Kerwin and General Manager Brad Siebe say that every day they wake up and still stay in business is a milestone for the garden center, but more specific achievements include the store's ongoing renovations over the last 12 to 15 years. New glass greenhouses are almost everywhere, most of them Private Garden structures, and a couple hundred parking spaces have been added to the property.

Although Swansons started as a growing operation in 1924, it's now strictly retail, selling mostly plants and only about 25 percent hardgoods. The decision to abandon the growing part of the operation was an easy one for Kerwin.

"We don't have the space," he says. "Being five acres and in the city, and with the dollar value we do, our turnover is high, and our bench space is a premium. We can't afford to let crops sit on a bench."

State-Of-The-Art

Kerwin and Siebe say they rely



heavily on Swansons' POS system. It's not just convenient – it's essential.

"We wouldn't survive without it – we couldn't survive without it," says Kerwin.

"We have every available current technology and application available for garden centers, too," adds Siebe.

All of Swansons' methods for reporting and filtering financial data also are state-of-the-art, and they have up-to-the-minute knowledge of the store's margins, turnover and sales per square foot. "All the stuff you need to know to survive in the 22nd century," says Kerwin. "We're already in the 21st, and it's too late to talk about that. Everybody was looking ahead to 2000 and how to update, and we were looking to 2025 and being current for that."



The Festivities Garden Café lets customers relax in the tropics.

Bringing 'Em Back

Swansons doesn't offer a loyalty program in the true sense of the term, and one of the reasons is that people in the region are reluctant to give out their personal information. The increase in merchants in the area requesting that kind of information has created some consumer backlash, and Swansons didn't want to be a part of that.

"We actually use more of an old-fashioned system for rewarding our customers," says Siebe. "Customers can earn dollar coupons – Swan Dollars. That to a certain extent is kind of rewards program."

Each year, Swansons changes the graphics on the Swan Dollars so they're always fresh and new.

Making It Work

Kerwin says one of his greatest successes is simply being able to open the store's doors every morning. Several challenges along the way have made that a difficult task, especially all the construction over the last few years, as Siebe explains: "It's just amazing that we did some of this work while we were open. There's not really much downtime here for us – we're in a year-round market for our region, and so it's really challenging to do construction and renovation and still maintain your daily operations."

Kerwin agrees, noting that when they construct new buildings, they have to do it in a very short window of time in order not to be disruptive. Although winters are rainy in Seattle, they're also relatively mild, so store traffic is strong year round.

"January is our slowest month, and we try to cram everything we can into January with renovations, but that's a pretty short time when you're talking about building new buildings," he says.

Turning A Profit

As far as sales go, Kerwin and Siebe say Swansons is well-balanced, and no specific item stands out as being a top seller.

"Overall we have a really strong shopping experience," says Kerwin. "It's not so much a single product – it's just the wow effect of how we merchandise and what we do."

He does say, though, that container gardens are popular. Sales of pre-planted containers, created by Swansons' design department, have been growing, and with the increasing demand for ready-made, instant patio and deck gardens, that trend is expected to continue.

In the future, Kerwin just hopes Swansons will maintain its current level of growth, which is around 10 percent annually. It's not about sales, he says. It's about turning a profit.

"We're less enamored about reaching sales milestones as we are margins and profitability," says Kerwin. "We feel that now that the construction is mostly behind us, we can pay attention to the financial end a little

Swansons Nursery

Owner: Wally Kerwin

Location: Seattle, Wash.

Size: 5 acres

Annual Sales: \$8 million

Web site: www.swansonnurser

Garden Café

Swansons has had a café for more than 10 years and recently built a new one, which is housed in a brand new conservatory. Kerwin says a café can be important to a destination garden center, because it can extend customers' shopping time. When they get worn out, instead of heading home, they can relax with a latté or a bowl of soup and then get back to their shopping.

"From that standpoint it really helps complete the merchandising and the sales efficiency of a five acre destination garden center," says Kerwin.

Swansons employees aren't responsible for running the Garden Café, though. They instead lease the space and receive a monthly rent check, which is an option to consider for retailers concerned about operating a café themselves.

When thinking about leasing the space, though, there are some things to consider. Kerwin says the Swansons

more and improve our profitability. That's probably more important to us than the sales part."

café offers a pleasant dining experience, but he wishes it could be a bit more fine tuned.

In regards to competition, Kerwin and Siebe see any leisure activity that isn't gardening as more of a threat than any of the big boxes or supermarkets.

"Our café could do more to complement the customer base we have, but we don't control that," he says. "It's a lease space, so we can't influence the character of the café, other than the character of the facility we provide for them."

"We have all kinds of recreational things that are competition – the football teams, baseball teams, basketball teams, skiing," says Kerwin. "Anything that would compete for their leisure time is our competition."

Kerwin and Siebe also expressed concern that gardening as a hobby is declining. That's not to say they're not optimistic about the future, though.

"With the generation shift and change, a lot of the younger generations don't necessarily consider (gardening) a hobby yet," says Siebe. "But they will as they get older."

Teaming Up

While Swansons' renovations and technological advancements have been invaluable, both Kerwin and Siebe agree the most important aspect of the nursery's success is not its POS system or cutting-edge new glass houses. It's the teamwork that goes into running the daily business. Maintaining camaraderie and a team approach is what's truly vital.

"We use the team approach to decision-making," says Kerwin. "There's not a lot we say or do around here without running it past several of us, and we have frequent planning sessions at least one season in advance about what's being brainstormed for the coming season. Then at the end of any particular season, we do a few sessions with each of the department managers of what worked and what needs improving," he adds. "That's our real strength."

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