



Two very different stories with one similar theme, the owners of **Groovy Plants Ranch** in Ohio and **Piedmont Feed and Garden Center** in North Carolina recently purchased retail operations to fuel their passions.

By Abby Kleckler

The sting in the industry can be felt every time a garden center closes its doors. Your businesses are full of history, enthusiasm and a goal to help every one of your customers.

Both retail and horticulture are changing though, and often the conversation centers around how to get new shoppers into the store while keeping current customers engaged.

Lawn & Garden Retailer spoke separately with two garden center owners who are new to the retail space. They represent the younger demographic many of you are trying to relate to, they provide a fresh perspective to their businesses and they have a passion that drew them to the industry.

First, **Jared Hughes** has been in the industry for a number of years. After the untimely passing of an industry friend of his, Jeff Russell, who owned Fargo Herbs in Marengo, Ohio, Jared and his wife Liz purchased that business. Groovy Plants Ranch — which was primarily wholesaling succulents at the time — moved to the old Fargo Herbs site and opened its retail operation last spring.

Second, **Chris Williamson** and his wife Lilly had been customers of Piedmont Feed and Garden Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, separately for years. When the owners were looking to retire three years ago, it seemed like the perfect opportunity for Chris and Lilly to combine their hobbies with their careers, and they bought the business in December 2013.

Groovy Plants Ranch

LGR: How has the past year been not only transitioning to a new location but also doing retail for the first time? What have you been most surprised about?

Jared Hughes: Of course I'd already been in business for like eight years under Groovy Plants, and that was a brand and business that I put a lot of myself into, so I wasn't crazy about just dropping it, so we did change the name of Fargo Herbs to Groovy Plants, and over the past year, we've kind of been putting our own stamp on things, while still retaining a lot of what Fargo Herbs was.

I have lived out in the country for over half my life. Everything for us was wholesale up until last year, so I could take my plants down to the city, and they sold great, but I really didn't know how people would respond.

We had no records from Fargo Herbs as far as their plant mix or their yearly sales records, so finding our product mix was hard. We closed in January, which a lot of our stuff should have already been going by then, so we were just scrambling to grow anything we could.

The biggest thing with Groovy Plants up until this point was "grow the stuff no one else would bother with." Of course, everyone is growing succulents now, but for a while there if you were

getting succulents, you were getting them out of Florida or California.

No one was really messing with them, and we'd already built a great following with our succulents.

The question kind of came down to, "Do we do a bread-and-butter mix for the folks that already purchased from Fargo Herbs, so we don't alienate them, or do we just stick to our really weird stuff and just hope people come out and buy that?"

It was about trying to strike a balance. I think one of the best things we ever did for the business was give it a funny name like Groovy Plants because people remember it. Groovy Plants basically entails that it's stuff that I like to grow, which not all of it is crazy. We do a lot of perennials, tons of succulents.

So the biggest surprise I had was how much people were really into the unique plants, and there's more of a niche market down in the city, but I had no data or information to go off of, so I ended up pitching a bunch of bread-and-butter annuals that I had no business messing with anyway.

LGR: Can you talk a little bit about demographics, who's shopping at Groovy Plants and what your offerings are?

Hughes: I've sat through plenty of the lectures on what's wrong with today's garden center, how do we attract millennials, and what can you do for your business. And when I was at Foertmeyer & Sons [Greenhouse in Delaware, Ohio], that was



one of the things I dealt with: What do we do to get a younger audience and keep people engaged?

When we came here, it was an instant fit. We instantly solved the riddle. It feels really good that we have a young following, and it's just been impressive.

I mean I wanted to stay in the country just because I love living out here and have peace and quiet during my downtime, which I value. Then all of a sudden, we find out there's a brewery right down the road, which is completely out of place. This is the country, lots of farmland.

But there's this brewery that also has a restaurant in Columbus, and you could kind of say these plants are like the perfect hipster plant. Our demographic is so different.

You get a bunch of bodybuilders coming in here to buy air plants from the city. They got in their car and drove 40 minutes north to buy air plants, and it's just one of those things we really couldn't expect.

We still have the traditional customer; I call her Jenny, who's like 45 and maybe has a couple kids. And she's still here and loves it, but we get all kinds of young people too, as well as older customers.

I was concerned that maybe with the silly name there might be some turnoff especially being in a rural area, and that was just a total miscalculation.

We started playing with plant breeding a couple years ago, and hopefully there's some things coming out on the market. I can't talk much about it yet, but plant breeding is something we're really interested in, especially with succulents.

Some of what we want to do is offer some of those plants exclusively here, so maybe our F1 hybrids that we don't necessarily want to push into the market because they don't necessarily have wide market appeal, but they might have appeal here as essentially a craft-grown item.

A lot of people my age [29] are buying things on Etsy because it's a one-of-a-kind item made by an artist. Well the same kind of goes — or at least that's how I envision — for all these F1 hybrids that aren't really worth putting on the market, but they really are one-of-a-kind plants that you actually can't get anywhere else.

We've already done a bit of selling them, but I want to market it as a unique side of the business.

The first season we had to buy a few things in, but most things we grow ourselves, and we call them small-batch plants. We're not doing 10,000 of one crop. We're doing 100 of one crop, or maybe 500 at most. Even the plants that are not unique just to our business are propriety plants. Every plant that moves through here was hand planted by us, so we very much project that this is a craft-grown business.

I personally love desert gardens, and I live in Ohio, so that can be difficult. We grow a lot of unique and rare plants from seed and cold-hardy cacti and succulents are a big part of that, so we have a pretty hardy collection of cold hardy cacti that you can grow in the ground, in Ohio, over winter.

You pull into our tiny little parking lot, and the first thing you see is this straight up Arizona rock garden in front that is loaded with cacti that are blooming. We put big agaves in the ground that's like a desert scene.

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MANAGEMENT

We've gotten more comments and questions like, "Do those things stay outside all winter?" and we're like, "Yes, they do, and we have them right over here." Because we grow a lot of unique plants, there's a lot of education involved in the selling process.

LGR: What's the experience like at Groovy Plants, and, in addition to plant breeding, are there other things in the pipeline for your second retail season?

Hughes: We have a unique experience. One of our greenhouses has an Old Wild West Mercantile front end on it, and it looks like an Old West store when you walk in and it's all succulents, the whole greenhouse.

We have this hippie Western theme going on, and succulents inspired a lot of it. People seem to respond to it; it's super unique and not like anywhere else nearby.

We're hoping this year we'll be able to focus on the online store and actually start promoting it more.



We've been using the schoolhouse on the property for workshops and classes, which is something I did at Foertmeyer & Sons. This first year with classes, it was more just testing the waters, but they were popular enough for us to know that they will be great if we invest a little more time into them, so that's why we renovated the schoolhouse.

It's not that difficult to fill the schoolhouse because it'll hold about 30 people, and if we get to the point where we're doing three workshops a week, that would be great.

Also, because we do unique plants, we're kind of a natural fit for garden groups, and garden groups spend money.

People go back and forth on garden groups and whether they're worth their time but for us it's

very much so. They can come do their meetings and events and then tour the property and buy plants.

The classroom is a great use of the space, and we kind of think about it romantically in that the space is being used for what it was originally intended for.

You can go to any garden center and probably find most of what we have there, but you can't find it the same way you can here.

When people come, they're talking to me; they're talking to the owner. We don't have employees. I'm going to hire my first employee this spring, so yeah, it's small and our volume is pretty great.

I've just been blown away and am excited for spring because I know it'll be great.



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Piedmont Feed & Garden Center

LGR: What made you want to start this adventure three years ago? What was your vision when you first purchased the store?

Chris Williamson: My wife and I had both been customers of this business independently before we got married, and we knew the owner well and all of our hobbies are sort of tied up in the business.

I've been a gardener for a long time, and my wife and I both ride horses and have dogs, cats, chickens and sort of a mini-homestead thing. We were in careers that we were not pleased with, and the opportunity to buy this business came open and we thought it sounded like a much better lifestyle in an arena that we were really interested in and in a market we thought had a lot of potential.

So a lot of check boxes just sort of lined up for us, and we've been really pleased with it.

The business is split between garden center and feed store. So those two businesses were sort of there, and we felt like there was a lot of room for expansion down some different veins of those businesses.

For instance, the store sold plants before but not nearly the quantity or number of varieties that we do currently. They didn't really do pottery, so we've added pottery. They didn't do decorative indoor pottery, so we've added that. So we have some associated lines that seemed like no-brainers to us.

They had a basic wild bird section and we've really beefed up wild birds and brought in a higher end line of feed and different types of feed.

The basics were here, but we have just really expanded on those.

LGR: Can you talk a bit about your customers? Who's coming through your doors and how do you get people to stop for the first time?

Williamson: We redid the front landscaping of our store. When we bought the store, there was a huge line of 6-foot tall hollies that completely lined our road frontage.

This past spring we pulled those out and repositioned our sign, lit our sign and put in a 200-foot-long pollinator garden that is completely along our road frontage, and we have been amazed at the number of people who have come



in and say, "I drive by your store every day, but I had no idea you were here."

We sort of joke that pulling out those hollies was the best business decision that we've ever made, and the cheapest. That has been really good for getting new customers in.

We've also seen in the last three years the work we've put into the garden center end of the business as far as expanding plant selection, the feedback from the community has been overwhelmingly positive. And just as the word of mouth has spread, it's really rewarding to see people come in the door.

We have been able to target new people because of the geographic location that we're in, we're just outside of the Chapel Hill/Carrboro area, which is a really progressive, educated area.

A lot of the first organic farmer's markets in the area were founded in the Chapel Hill/Carrboro area, and we've got sort of that clientele, but our store is 7 miles outside of town in a much more rural area, so we also have cattle farmers.

It's just an interesting mix of demographics as far as the customer base goes.

I've joined the Chapel Hill Garden Club and we offer a discount on plants to them, so we've gotten a lot of new customers from that. We have a lot of new customers just in general.

We've really upped our social media game, which was essentially non-existent before we bought this store. They had a Facebook page that wasn't utilized and when it was, the content was kind of questionable, so we've completely revamped it, and we've started an Instagram account.

LGR: Are there any categories that have really surprised you?

Williamson: We added in fairy gardening two years ago, and that has done extraordinarily well.

Along with just the fairy gardening stuff, we've added miniature plants. We carry a miniature conifer line, 2-inch terrarium plants and succulents, and all that stuff has done really well. That's been a really consistent performer.



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Our fairy gardening classes are really good. We usually have one every other weekend in the spring, and we're going to add them in the fall this year. They've generally had a really strong attendance and the per-ticket sales on those are really strong.

We also get a lot of comments from customers that say they're so pleased we have our pollinator garden out there.

There's a focus on native plants that are beneficial for pollinators and also for birds, so we get a lot of positive feedback from that.

A restaurant locally saw us on social media, and we did a pollinator install at their restaurant as a result of it, which was really great.

We have a big focus on pollinators, and beneficial plants for birds and pollinators. We also do a big business in vegetables in the spring.

L&GR: What have you been most surprised by in the past three years?

Williamson: We've gotten to know so many of our customers, which has been a really positive thing for us.

We know so many of our customers' names and their pets' names and we know what's going on with their kids, so we do 25,000 tickets [transactions] a year but we see repeat business which is really, really nice.



We kept all of the existing staff when we bought the company, so we have really leaned on those folks. Our manager has been with us for 11 years and has been tremendously helpful.

Also, we've got a really good network of local growers that we have gotten to know, and we're really able to draw on them for what's going to work this season or what's not going to work.

I've been really surprised in this area that a

couple businesses in the industry have sold to people with no background in the industry like us, which is somewhat reassuring that we didn't just jump off a cliff.

Literally all of our hobbies are things that we have in the store, so it's really sort of an extension of our personal lifestyle, which is nice.

You get to do what you're interested in for work. What better thing is there than that? **L&GR**

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