



# Recipe for Success: Meet Earl Lieske



**By Christina Salwitz**

If you take a generous heaping of Midwestern nice, a respectable quantity of service experience from a young age, throw in some well-seasoned family horticulture experience, add to that an impressive amount of education, and you find you have the recipe for one self-proclaimed “extroverted introvert” designer making his mark in this industry.

Meet Earl Lieske, container designer at Chalet Nursery in Wilmette, Illinois.

If you’ve read this column regularly, you might recall my mini-tantrum a while back asking for nominations of design professionals (specializing in container gardens) to help me get their names and faces out there for all to see.

We’ve been (OK, I’ve been) desperate to see evidence of some fresh 21st century design ideas across this great land, and did we ever succeed with this one. Earl Lieske is the real deal.

## The Start of It All

Hailing from Grand Ridge, Illinois, a farming community of 700, Earl had all the ingredients to become a skilled designer early on. While his mother was a P.E. teacher, Earl’s father was a chef in a restaurant where Earl helped out and learned that working hard in food service was a great platform for understanding the art of customer service, the foundation for excellent communication skills and even bartending! I’m sure that part made him an uber-skilled listener for sure.

Many of our grandparents were adept gardeners out of necessity. Earl got a double dose of those passed-down skills from both sides of his family where all of his grandparents set wonderful examples of what large productive gardens can achieve.

The gardening gene was definitely passed down to Earl as he made the decision to follow his heart and focus on making his education and career about horticulture.

Earl found his way to Joliet where he earned a notable four associate’s degrees. Landscape, Nursery, Greenhouse and Turfgrass Management were all areas that gave way to bigger scale dreams, so he went on to apply for a three-month internship at the famed





Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania. Then he moved across the pond to an internship at the National Trust Gardens in Scotland where training to run an estate garden was the focus. And then a return to another stint at Longwood for another nine months.

As if that weren't enough, Earl set his sights on and achieved a bachelor's degree in Plant and Soils Science and Horticulture from Southern Illinois that led him to an internship at the Holden Arboretum and then a master's degree funded by the USDA at Southern Illinois University. Phew, just typing that exhausted me, but I'm old!

Which brings us to today and why I've gathered all of you around the campfire (Phone? Laptop?) to learn about Earl while he's busy being Earl.

### The Design

Chalet Nursery in Wilmette, Illinois, has been the business that has entrusted its family of container gardening customers to Earl now for eight years. In garden center years, that's like 75 years. But clearly, it's his passion for helping people, giving his best and focusing on bringing excellence in design to the North Shore, Chicagoland destination nursery that makes it work. He has a devoted following on Instagram (@EarlLieske) where fans adore his creations and his charm.

The design perspective that Earl has is also one that is close to my own heart; and it starts with foliage

being central to his work. (Insert this author's own desk version of the Snoopy dance here.)

Earl also included the use of contrast and texture as part of his winning focus but noted the rise in monochromatic themes as one of his favorite design trends lately.

In total, he finds the use of foliage and texture to not only be more challenging, but also ultimately more dynamic than "huge, gaudy buckets of color."

In an area known for its genteel use of mostly white and green for summer oomph, Earl tries to shake that buttoned-up style a bit with his use of shape and form in his designs.

Making arrangements that echo the asymmetry of Japanese flower arranging with 180 angles rather than everything radiating from one central "centerpiece" that everything else dances around is the secret sauce in his recipe for design success.

By giving the container combinations more depth and interesting shapes, it gives him the room to also challenge the basics of greens and white with a bit of lavender and chartreuse too. And the customers respond to his delicate expansion of their tried-and-true flavor combinations.

### New Trends

Earl is finding as many of us are these days that the demographic they have always had for container gardens is slowly changing and reflecting some fun new trends.



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Younger people and a more culturally diverse audience are wanting more pizzazz. They're excited about the use of more tropicals and houseplants in what would be typical combinations. And Earl is more than happy to oblige and even take it a step further to include shrubs, edibles and other landscape plants that bring a duality of purpose and help extend the value for the customer.

Even those customers who might have formerly paid to replace white orchids indoors every six weeks are now open to new ideas that further expand their palate for new flavor and color combinations in their container recipes.

By using faux stems in new ways, Earl brings a contemporary essence to a design for winter that they might never have considered, which is perfect for those hard-to-grow spots indoors in a freezing Chicago winter.

By making customers feel comfortable, letting them guide the design conversation, yet helping them set realistic expectations, Earl knows how to help his customers get the best from him and offers some insight into his design contracts. Most of his designs fall into a few price categories (\$99 to \$129 or \$139 to \$169).

Chalet will even pick up the customers' pots as well as pot on site. However, and this is KEY, prices for custom container designs are NOT publicly posted anywhere. I've been saying what a poor retail move that is for years, and I was thrilled to hear that Chalet is so smart that way.

The last thing we want to do is give the customer any reason not to approach us and avoid having the custom container conversation before we've had the chance to sell the idea.

Earl is seeing some of the same trends in container garden design requests as we are in the garden center at large nationwide; an uptick in those who want to support pollinators is BIG, customers are requesting more perennials, they want more dual-purpose trees and shrubs to be able to go from pots to landscape, and then the monochromatic color schemes.

Spread some fudgy icing love on this profile of horticultural cooking and artistry! If you're on Instagram or near Chicago, go find Earl and see his lovely work. I'm sure he will share some recipes if you ask. And if you know of a designer who should be featured here, you know the drill: [personalgardencoach@comcast.net](mailto:personalgardencoach@comcast.net). 🍷

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