



A Nursery CELEBRATES ART AND NATURE

How Rutgers Landscape & Nursery in Ringoes, New Jersey, found a way to host an arts weekend during the pandemic.

By Teresa McPherson

For one weekend in late 2020, Rutgers Landscape & Nursery in Ringoes, New Jersey, transformed into an arts haven. The event was organized by Rutgers Landscape & Nursery's Jeff Dallesander and Catherine Schurdak, who say the idea started with plein air painters and a desire to offer an arts venue that wasn't otherwise available.

"We knew that, in the early days of COVID-19, there really wasn't a venue for art," she says. "We thought that the arts didn't have a place to display, local theaters and galleries were closed, so I think this is probably what was attractive to all the participants — we were hosting and promoting local artists. I think that that was part of the appeal as well."

About 11 painters were present at the September 2020 event, who came with their own set ups and were there from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

"These were people who had painted outdoors before," Schurdak says, "so that's primarily what they were doing. I was really hoping to get a wider range of artists — I would love to have seen a sculptor — but it just didn't get any takers or they couldn't figure out how to bring their craft to us so they could actually work there. I'll work on that for [2021]."

A photographer worked at the event, as well as several musicians. "We thought it was important to add music, to add some texture," she says. "I had different musicians for each day. The first day, we had a classical trio of flute, violin and cello. On the second day, we had a harpist at the front of the nursery greeting customers, and then as you moved past the shop into the nursery proper, we had a duo of a classic guitarist playing with a double bass, so that was very quiet — more atmospheric, really. They created a great draw; sometimes people would just gather to listen, and we wanted to make sure that people had a place to sit and rest."

"We had a local coffee shop [Hardy's Café] come in; we have a cafe setting within our greenhouse that they took that over: they had hot and cold drinks served from carafes and baked goods and quiche as options for people to buy."

"And we had dancers — I had a local dance school come. I wanted contemporary and not scripted, they just moved throughout the nursery."

Both Sides Represented

Dallesander points out that the event was also a fundraiser. "We wanted to make the event meaningful to our community. We collected donations and we made a donation to two local food banks; where we are located in New Jersey is close to the Pennsylvania border, so we wanted to represent a New Jersey food bank as well as a Pennsylvania food bank [The Flemington Area Food Pantry and Delaware Valley Food Pantry]."

When Schurdak made posters for the event, she not only promoted the artists — who were from both sides of the border — but asked people to bring donations for those food banks. The nursery promised a percentage of sales as a donation to follow.

Bringing People to the Nursery

Dallesander and Schurdak are no strangers to planning events at Rutgers Landscape & Nursery.



"We've traditionally hosted a ladies' night, which has grown as more people find out about it," Schurdak says. "It's basically an open invitation to customers — ladies or otherwise — in which we have invited a local winery to do wine tasting, we have a local caterer come in, and local vendors — maybe a chocolatier or someone who sells olive oils, certainly a little bit of clothing and accessories — so that the attendees have things to do."

"There's usually a salon doing maybe a quick back massage or a hand massage. So we have all these vendors, as well as the food and the wine, and it's really just an open house. Of course Covid concerns meant that we couldn't host the event like before — we had to change it up," she says.

Schurdak says that, in spring of 2020, parks in New Jersey were closed, "and so people were coming to us. I worked the front desk and I could see how happy people were to be at the nursery, whether they were shopping or not."

"Our message this year has been, 'Join us outdoors, come explore our 12 acres,' and it just grew into this arts idea. We have this great facility; how can we get people to come in smaller groups and keep the event outdoors? That was really how it grew."



“There was a growing interest in gardening in 2020 — there’s no question — so we sold out of vegetables very quickly, as did other garden centers and nurseries. We could see that interest, but really, we also saw that people were just happy to be outdoors. People were thanking us for being open, you could see that at the front desk, and that was really the beginning of the idea is of, ‘Could we share this space?’

“We are a 12-acre nursery, so we’ve got an awful lot of outside space. We were so happy to be open in the spring [of 2020], and we could see how grateful people were, how relieved they were to be outside.

Art in the Time of Coronavirus

Some of the rules they set up for COVID compliance included asking people to wear masks when in close proximity and to maintain social distancing.

“Each artist had their own dedicated space, so they were painting on their own, and, given the nature of the nursery, they were usually surrounded by plants.” Dallesander created and set up display walls for the artists using standard shipping pallets that were put together to become a standing wall. In addition, metal trellises served as grids to hang the artists’ work, so that then gave them a six-foot little stage; people could look at their work, but they didn’t have to get too close.

“We tried to accommodate if people were particularly concerned — it was easy enough to stage an area with pots or shrubbery around them to create kind of a natural stage and a little bit of distance.”

Promoting the Event

To publicize the event, Schurdak says they started out with a weekly Constant Contact email to their customers, as

well as posts on their Facebook and Instagram accounts.

“We also promoted it through the participants themselves,” she says. “I made sure that each participant had both jpegs and PDFs for their various Instagram and Facebook. We also gave them printed announcements if they wanted to hand those out or leave them in a gallery or their studios, so all the participants were also given those tools to then promote.”

The event was also advertised within the store. “We had handouts, so as the cashiers at the front desk met with each customer to ring them up, we’d say, ‘Oh, and here’s your invitation — we’re having an arts weekend.’ When we mailed people receipts or any plant information, we always put those little brochures into the envelopes. And we had posters in the store and notices on our website and social media.”

On the day of the event, a handout was distributed with information about each participant, the coffee shop and the fundraiser.

“It also featured a map of the nursery and showed where the artists were located,” Schurdak says. “We printed those and assembled those in-house.”

Great Results

“For an employee, it was terrific,” she said. “Rutgers Nursery is a beautiful, beautiful place. I think that for the group of us that work at Rutgers, we love it there, and it is a great place. We sell great plants, we have great people selling those plants that know where they should be planted and how they like to grow.

“[The arts event] was a first for us, so we didn’t quite know what to expect. It was marvelous. The nursery just shone ... our customers and guests, the artists, and everyone working that weekend stood back and said, ‘Wow, this place is amazing.’” 🌙