

# Gardens for Rent: Only a Space?

Garden center owners seek an unconventional way to expand their business.

By Neda Simeonova



**G**ive me an S, give me an E, give me an L, give me an L...SELL! Reorganize your departments, improve customer service, add better labels and signage, and the list goes on — we've talked a lot in past issues about the importance of being creative and staying off the beaten path when it comes to ideas that could help make your business more successful. And as the competition between box stores and independents continues, what should you do to ensure your spot in the race?

After a couple of years of "the worst drought in the history of New York" followed by a very wet year, which nearly put him out of business, Matt Horn, owner of Matterhorn Nursery, Spring Valley, N.Y., found himself looking for a non traditional avenue to bring in additional income — get paid from the rental of his land.

## THE HISTORY

Matterhorn Nursery spreads over 40 acres, 10 acres of which is dedicated to display gardens. Horn opened a retail store in 1996 after starting originally as a wholesale grower, shipping perennials and water plants throughout the Northwest. Today, Matterhorn Nursery features a complete horticultural center with one of the largest aquatic centers in the country, tree, shrub and annual areas along a major rose garden, alpine garden, hosta garden, a grass walk as well as many other garden plans still in the works. But the biggest project of all, currently in progress, is renting the gardens out for events such as weddings, corpo-

rate retreats, photo shoots, anniversaries, garden clubs and seminars.

Partly, Horn's inspiration came from Brian Minter, owner of Minter Gardens, Chilliwack, BC, Canada, who has been involved in the event business for several years. Minter's 30-acre show garden was initially involved mainly in the tourist business, "Visitors pay \$12 (Canadian) admission to go through and experience the garden," Minter said. "We found that after 9/11 American tourists just didn't feel comfortable travelling so we went into the wedding business big time." Minter built two conservatories for scheduled ceremonies and complete wedding receptions. "It has been a savior because no matter what happens, people are still getting married," Minter explained.

Although following in Minter's footsteps, Horn's plans are to avoid being fully involved in the event business. "I'd like to get paid for the rental of my land," he said. "Running an event place can be extremely profitable. We have 10 acres of gardens, and it takes up a lot of space and money to maintain. We have gardeners who maintain the garden and keep it really nice, so it is just a matter of having someone book the events and have a planner to deal with it. We're not going to be involved with things such as setting the tables and this and that; we are just renting the land."

## THE DETAILS

**Planing.** Currently, Horn is still in the process of accomplishing his new goals. Last year he started off by hiring a locator, a company that schedules photo, magazine, book and catalog shoots, and has had some success with it.▶

Top: Seating area and view from the Rose Garden Cottage at Matterhorn Nursery. Bottom: Perennial flower border alongside the Matterhorn Pond. (All photos courtesy of Matterhorn Nursery)



Because they are not allowed to cook on the premises, along with renting space, Horn offers a menu and catering service that he designed. “If we cater in, the caterer holds the liquor license,” he explained. “It is basically as if I had an event planner, but instead, we are just getting paid for our land, and we want 10 percent of the catering; if they have a band, we want 10 percent of that as well.”

Similar to Minter Gardens, Matterhorn Nursery is about to gate its gardens and plans to start charging garden visitors admission. “I am not hungry for money, but part of the problem is that people are using our nursery as a park, which means they come to visit and they leave and don’t buy,” Horn explained. “I need to pay my bills, and we are limited on parking, so when these guys came in and took our parking spaces, it hurt us.” However, in order to prevent a drawback from the gating of the gardens, Horn said members of their preferred gardeners program will still be able to get in for free.

Minter agrees, believing the nemesis of garden stores is that they put a lot of effort into creating a positive experience for their customers and yet, don’t get paid for it. “You have to charge for the experience, and it has to be a value for their time, not value for their money,” Minter added. And Minter ensures his customers receive the experience they paid for. “Last year we put miniature trains that took people through the garden, we planted daffodils in the spring and then tulips followed by sunflowers in the summer and other things as well. So in other words, it’s not just a train ride, it is what you experience on the train ride.”

**Challenges.** Business plans often encounter many challenges, and both Minter and Horn agree that one of the first steps is the permit process. “It took us two years to get through the permit process,” Horn said. “For us it was basically neighbors. We’re located in a residential area, and people always want to know what we’re doing.” Even after two years there are still gray areas. According to Horn, “It’s just been a fight. We can hold events, ▶

Top: A garden serpent topiary feature in the side garden pond at Matterhorn Nursery; Bottom: A wedding at The Rose Garden Cottage.

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but we are not sure if weddings are events. Weddings are iffy, but we are going to run them and see what happens." Although the neighborhood is happy with the 40 acres of green space Matterhorn Nursery

brings to the area, "they fight everything you do. That's why it took us two years," Horn explained.

According to Minter, "Permits are probably the most difficult challenges in this area other

than adjusting the infrastructure. In other words, it does cost money to put in infrastructure, but it is one of those things that over time you do get a good return on your investment."

**Staff.** Along with zoning permits, another big adjustment is the staff. Adding a whole new aspect to your business will require the necessary full-time/part-time staff adjustments, as well as the creation of some new positions such as event planner, etc. "We are subbing out," Horn said. "We don't have an event planner on staff right now; it's just my wife and myself going to people to try and drum our business for the events." Horn added that eventually he would like to have someone on staff, as well as get the business developed to the point where they would be doing a lot more than renting out the land but for now. "We want to take it slow and see how it is going to come about," Horn said.

**Promotion.** Although Matterhorn Nursery doesn't advertise and has relied mainly on word-of-mouth and its reputation to draw business in, Horn is making sure to take full advantage of free publicity. "We really push the buttons with press releases," he said. "Advertising in New York state is extremely expensive, but we are debating doing some cable and maybe radio advertising." In addition, Matterhorn Nursery has partnered with other companies outside the industry and is doing a



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The David Austin Rose Garden features Haddonstone English statuary.



lot of cross-promotion. “We have very good arborists in the county; we partnered with them, so they hand out our brochures to their customers, and we do the same for them,” Horn explained. This

spring they also partnered with a local Ford dealership in the county. “It’s a very high-end Ford, and they have extremely good customer service. They give out a preferred Matterhorn Nursery card to

Overview of The David Austin Rose Garden’s formal pool and fountains.

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their car buyers for 10 percent off when they shop here,” Horn said.

According to Minter, brochures have been the most successful type of advertising for Minter Gardens. “The majority of our market is not local, so you have to promote yourself differently,” Minter said. “Brochures have been most successful because you can put something in people’s hands and that is very important.” Minter also does a lot of media work. He is a syndicated gardening columnist with various Lower Mainland newspapers in Canada, as well as a radio columnist and gardening host on cable TV and garden series on the Knowledge Network. “Those are the main ways to reach people,” Minter added.

**THE FUTURE**

So what’s in store for Matterhorn Nursery? If all goes well Horn is hoping to generate between one-half and one million dollars from renting the display gardens for events. “And just like any business we want it to grow 5 or 10 percent per year,” Horn added. His goal is to have about 20 weddings per year along with hosting high teas, twice a month and other events.

So as we look at the box stores and how their role will shape up the independents, the key to many garden centers’ success might be hidden in providing high-end services such as renting their beautiful gardens and hosting events. And remember, it is not just space, use it wisely.

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