

IGC Independent Garden Center Magazine

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016

IGC SHOW FROM THE IGC SHOW  OFFICIAL PUBLICATION

SINCE 1955, INDEPENDENT AND PROUD OF IT!



PRSAT STD
US POSTAGE PAID
MAILED FROM
ZIP CODE 54911
PERMIT 23

ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED

2873 Saber Drive
Clearwater, FL 33759

*C*ARAS NURSERY & LANDSCAPE
IGC VISIONARY RETAILER:
Reviving the Passion for IGC Retail

CARAS NURSERY'S

igcretailrevival



During his 40 years in the business, Bill Caras has weathered his share of storms. Now today, his renewed passion for IGC retail is paying off - sales are up, and the money's in the bank.

The unusually warm April in Missoula, MT, last season found Bill Caras leading Caras Nursery and Landscape to a sales total that broke the store's previous April record by a whopping 50 percent. Even with all the activity during the day, when the garden center closed in the evenings, Caras operated a forklift and Bobcat - somehow both, by himself - building new rock tables for his outdoor plant displays out of extra-large pieces of Montana flagstone, each about 12'x6' and weighing 3,000 pounds.

It wasn't the first time Caras' employees, like Greenhouse Manager Amy Keil, left at 9 p.m. a bit worried about Caras operating heavy equipment late into the night to finish a project - or the first time she would arrive at work the next morning to find a beautiful, finished display piece or structure.

"He's highly motivated to make things beautiful and has a detailed eye," says Keil.

The rock tables were part of a newly remodeled front entrance that includes a custom-made pergola arched to echo the roofline of the greenhouse and a steel sign Caras helped design.

Gone are the old uneven, worn and treacherous steps beneath a tired old pergola with wonky angles. Once those 3,000-pound flagstone pieces were in place and loaded with plants, Caras' vision was complete - at least on that project.

After 40 years, most of them as the sole owner and many of them full of long days and cold, rainy springs, it would have been easy for Caras to burn out on this business. And while there certainly was a tough, exhausting stretch of years, Caras is still enthusiastic and having fun, running his IGC known for its tailored, handpicked selection of plants and gardener-centric hardgoods beautifully displayed in a refreshing, delightful shopping atmosphere.

What a difference a few years and some key decisions can make. Last spring, especially, it's been all the difference in the world.



SIGN OF STRENGTH Caras' \$300,000 remodel this past spring included this new sign near the building that Caras designed with the help of a local artisan. It trumpets the store's rich history with the year of its founding, 1896.

It Was Time for an Attitude Adjustment

About a decade ago, Caras noticed how unhappy and frazzled he was. The cash flow was certainly part of the challenge. Sales had held at the same level, even through the recession, but the business could never seem to build money in the bank. It would pay off a line of credit, then a piece of equipment would go, and it would be right back to owing on the line of credit.

"It's really stressful," Caras says. "And it's already stressful anyway, with all the stuff we have going on, with all the personnel we have and the breakdowns we have, etc. Then if you add onto it that you're not making any money, it's exhausting."

He caught himself blaming a lot of things on the business and was stuck in a negative rut.

Then he stepped back. He reflected on what he most enjoyed about his work and decided to look at things differently - to focus on the fun and positive. "I really enjoy interacting with all these

continued on page 22

CARAS NURSERY'S



igcretail revival



During his 40 years in the business, Bill Caras has weathered his share of storms. Now today, his renewed passion for IGC retail is paying off - sales are up, and the money's in the bank.

The unusually warm April in Missoula, MT, last season found Bill Caras leading Caras Nursery and Landscape to a sales total that broke the store's previous April record by a whopping 50 percent. Even with all the activity during the day, when the garden center closed in the evenings, Caras operated a forklift and Bobcat - somehow both, by himself - building new rock tables for his outdoor plant displays out of extra-large pieces of Montana flagstone, each about 12'x6' and weighing 3,000 pounds.

It wasn't the first time Caras' employees, like Greenhouse Manager Amy Keil, left at 9 p.m. a bit worried about Caras operating heavy equipment late into the night to finish a project - or the first time she would arrive at work the next morning to find a beautiful, finished display piece or structure.

"He's highly motivated to make things beautiful and has a detailed eye," says Keil.

The rock tables were part of a newly remodeled front entrance that includes a custom-made pergola arched to echo the roofline of the greenhouse and a steel sign Caras helped design.

Gone are the old uneven, worn and treacherous steps beneath a tired old pergola with wonky angles. Once those 3,000-pound flagstone pieces were in place and loaded with plants, Caras' vision was complete - at least on that project.

After 40 years, most of them as the sole owner and many of them full of long days and cold, rainy springs, it would have been easy for Caras to burn out on this business. And while there certainly was a tough, exhausting stretch of years, Caras is still enthusiastic and having fun, running his IGC known for its tailored, handpicked selection of plants and gardener-centric hardgoods beautifully displayed in a refreshing, delightful shopping atmosphere.

What a difference a few years and some key decisions can make. Last spring, especially, it's been all the difference in the world.



SIGN OF STRENGTH Caras' \$300,000 remodel this past spring included this new sign near the building that Caras designed with the help of a local artisan. It trumpets the store's rich history with the year of its founding, 1896.

It Was Time for an Attitude Adjustment

About a decade ago, Caras noticed how unhappy and frazzled he was. The cash flow was certainly part of the challenge. Sales had held at the same level, even through the recession, but the business could never seem to build money in the bank. It would pay off a line of credit, then a piece of equipment would go, and it would be right back to owing on the line of credit.

"It's really stressful," Caras says. "And it's already stressful anyway, with all the stuff we have going on, with all the personnel we have and the breakdowns we have, etc. Then if you add onto it that you're not making any money, it's exhausting."

He caught himself blaming a lot of things on the business and was stuck in a negative rut.

Then he stepped back. He reflected on what he most enjoyed about his work and decided to look at things differently - to focus on the fun and positive. "I really enjoy interacting with all these

continued on page 22



people, with all these customers.”

He vowed to stop blaming the business and try to make it fun - and to keep things in perspective. “Don’t treat 98 percent of the people - whether employees or customers - based on the 2 percent who cause you pain.”

The answer on the cash flow issue turned out to be extra rigorous on multiple management points, including inventory, costs and categories.

“No matter what - no matter how crazy you are about plants, display, design, whatever - you have to make sure you’re keeping profitability in mind, too.”

It also involved downscaling the landscape maintenance portion of the landscape business. About eight years ago, the operation was about 50 percent retail and 50 percent landscape design, build and maintenance. The maintenance and irrigation systems work turned out to not be a good fit for Caras. The operation carried 10 to 12 employees for landscape maintenance through the winter, without enough snow to plow or other revenue-producing work to justify the expenses. And then a piece of equipment would require a costly repair.

The solution was to exit the maintenance business, spend less on overhead and better manage inventory.

“I never had any passion for it,” Caras says. “I’m a landscape designer, a plant guy, so when it came to a mowing service with three to four crews going every day, I just never could sink my teeth into it. Maybe I could have made it succeed, but I can only do so much. The more stuff you do, the less quality you bring to each individual operation.”

Spring Hit the Ground Running

When Caras anticipated unusually warm weather early this past spring, he accelerated preparations, and entire whole retail operation was ready by mid-March with plants, merchandise and smiles. Good thing, because the weather indeed stayed warm. The boost led to sales that hummed into the summer, with totals running 14 percent ahead of 2015 year-to-date as of early September.

“In my 39 years of running the garden center, this spring was in the top three. March was nice. April was nice. May was nice. We hardly ever get three out of

three. It was just unbelievable,” Caras says. “We did a fantastic job of reacting to the early season, especially Amy in the greenhouse. We had it ready to go in March.”

He never wants to be the jaded garden center operation that isn’t set up in time - even on an early, unusually warm day.

“It’s really important to not ever present that because then what will happen is, two weeks later, customers will go, ‘We should go ... nah, they’re probably not setup up yet.’ So it’s really important to me that we’re ready to go.”

The same applies for any weekend, throughout the year. “I call it ‘weekend readiness,’ and it doesn’t matter if it’s February 15 or May 15. We want to have something for people to experience.”

\$300K Renovation

This past spring, Caras’ customers experienced a whole new entrance, thanks to the \$300,000 renovation. One huge change was to make the parking lot level with the store floor, which meant filling the parking area, drainage work and repaving everything.

The leveling made for a safer, smoother entrance. In place of the old, straight-edged pergola, a new custom-built pergola precisely matches the line of the greenhouse roof.

The renovation included a new store sign along South 3rd Street West and a new sign near the building that Caras designed with the help of a local artisan, laser-cut from thick steel and mounted in a wooden frame matching the pergola. Cut-out steel flowers surround “1896” on the sign, the year the store was founded, and the store’s name in a modern take on Art Nouveau.

The newly streamlined entrance leads shoppers into a polished retail space where even the displays of utilitarian supplies, seeds

and tools are pretty. Front and center is a birch tree with branches reaching up into the ceiling and colorful paper leaves. It is “underplanted” with a garden cart, trellis and tropical houseplants in large pots.

“I love doing displays and making things look fun,” Marlise Flynn, Retail Manager, says. “It’s all about color for me. I come in early and just destroy the store, then put it back together again. You can make a mess

without people here.”

The main store showcases “fairylard,” with miniature decor and plants set among vines and mosses below a log canopy. A left turn in the main store leads customers toward the greenhouse, along what Caras calls the “gauntlet,” stocked with seasonal and a combination of useful and surprising items, like remedies for wasps in mid-summer.

continued on page 24





A right turn from the main store takes customers into a shop packed with gardener-centric and stylish decor: wall art, flags, botanical prints, ceramic birdbaths and pots, a funky frog sculpture and free-standing wooden chickens with wire tails and legs. A white tote bag with a vibrant red, juicy tomato image screams “buy me and fill me with produce.”

All of it is layered, tidy, polished and displayed among antique and vintage pieces like a chippy wooden counter with an open bottom and galvanized metal top, an antique shelving unit that was salvaged from behind a bar in Butte, MT, and a galvanized metal washstand.

Every item must carry its weight. Some kitchen items like teapots, for example, are pretty and may seem like they would be popular with gardener-cooks. But only a hard look at the numbers will tell the truth. “If they are not good numbers by the end of the year, they’ll be on the chopping block,” says Caras.

He finds quirky antiques, salvaged wood and other raw ingredients that he stashes away in a back room. “I get to play with really awesome things,” Flynn says. “He likes when I take something boring and make it quirky and fun.”

The store’s exquisitely layered look extends to the greenhouse, where birdbath bases, painted old windows and large pots are displayed among plants on the tables to add loads of visual interest.

“I’m a real stickler about getting hanging baskets down at eye level, where people can grab them easily,” says Caras. He prefers customers not to look up at the bottom of the basket, so he uses the birdbath bases on the tables to display them.

Outside, the new stone-topped plant tables lead customers toward curved walkways into the nursery yard. Caras follows garden design concepts like the curves and layered heights in the nursery yard, too, arranging nursery plants by height.

“People don’t know what they want,” Caras says. “So I say, ‘How tall do you want it to get?’ and about 75 percent of the time, they’d say, ‘Under this tall.’ Then I’m immediately able to walk them through here and not take them through everything we have.”

Caras has developed a reputation for sourcing plants that are both unusual and well-suited to the local growing conditions. “We see it as our niche,” he says. “We’re able to offer a lot of varieties. We look into things, researching them. That gives us an advantage over the box stores, where they have a standard set of options. Since we love plants, we work really hard at it.”

Popular sellers include natives, edibles, specialty dwarf conifers and anything deer-resistant. Many Missoula residents have transformed their yards into edible landscapes, so fruit trees and berries are popular sellers. Honeyberries - also known as “haskap” berries - were especially popular this past summer.

Identifying plants that will perform well takes constant research. Actually getting them to Missoula is another project entirely. “We’re not on a route,” Keil says. “Almost everybody stops in Spokane, and they don’t come this way, but Skagit Gardens does.” A few others do as well - but it’s not easy.

Caras and Keil assemble truckloads and shipping plans from among several suppliers. “It’s really a trick, putting full semis together from different nurseries or full semis from a single nursery, and then shipping it here,” says Caras. Relationships over the years have made it possible. Caras years ago traveled around Oregon and Washington with a directory of nurseries and a map, checking out plant stock and operations.

Leaning On a Loyal Staff

Caras is the sole owner of the business that his family has owned in his hometown since 1920, when his grandfather purchased the garden center and property out of bankruptcy. It has operated continuously since its initial founding in 1896. He has worked in the business since he was 23, when his father seemed relieved to let go of responsibilities. Caras almost immediately managed areas of the business until, one by one, he managed them all. He is now 62, and while his four children are proud of the operation, none of them have taken an interest in running it.

Caras remains at the helm, leaning on a loyal, longtime staff. Their chemistry is part of the

“secret sauce” here that helps give customers a fun, inviting atmosphere to shop.

“We laugh a lot, which is good, because a lot of my job does not involve much laughing,” Caras says. “Since I’m a sole operator, having someone to bounce stuff off of and commiserate with makes it more fun and less stressful.”

Helen Steiger has worked for Caras for 16 years. She is the glue, his chief sounding board and his right hand, if you will. She coordinates landscape design-build crews and fields any customer complaints or problems on both the retail and landscape sides of the business. She works with Caras on pricing for just about every SKU except greenhouse items - annual flowers,

vegetables, hanging baskets.

“We are like a family,” Steiger says. “Caras treats everyone with a lot of respect. He just does a lot for the community.”

Now, as Caras sees it, the business is in great shape: sales are rising, the facility looks great and there’s money in the bank.

“This past year, in particular, was really gratifying because we were able to make everything fall together,” Caras says. “I love plants, for one. I have some other plant nuts working for me. I’ve just always been pretty motivated about it. I made a lot of mistakes, but I never lost my enthusiasm.”

- Lisa Duchene, IGC Retail Correspondent

igc retailer vital stats

cover story exclusive



Business Summary

BUSINESS FOUNDED 1896
RETAIL LOCATION Missoula, MT
ANNUAL GROSS SALES \$2.9 million
PERCENTAGE RETAIL 76%
PERCENTAGE LANDSCAPE DESIGN 24%
CUSTOMER COUNT Up 10%
AVERAGE SALES TREND Up 5%
AVERAGE SALE PER CUSTOMER \$70

Local Market

CUSTOMER RADIUS, IN MILES 30 miles
NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN RADIUS 100,000
NUMBER OF GARDEN CENTERS IN RADIUS ~10
NUMBER OF BOXES AND MASS MERCHANTS THAT SELL L&G IN RADIUS 8

Estimated Space Allocation

TOTAL RETAIL 70,000 square feet
OUTDOOR SALES 50,000 square feet
INDOOR SALES 5,000 square feet
RETAIL GREENHOUSE 15,000 square feet

LANDSCAPE STAGING 30,000 square feet
STORAGE WAREHOUSE 10,000 square feet
TOTAL PRODUCTION AREA 8,000 square feet
DISPLAY GARDENS 4,000 square feet
NUMBER OF PARKING SPACES 90

Hours of Operation

Mon - Sat, 9 a.m. - 6 p.m.; **Sun**, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.;
Winter Mon - Sat, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.; **Sun**, closed

Employees

FULL-TIME Off season - 2, Peak season - 25, **PART-TIME** Off season - 5, Peak season - 45, **DEPARTMENT MANAGERS** 5, **OFFICE STAFF** 2

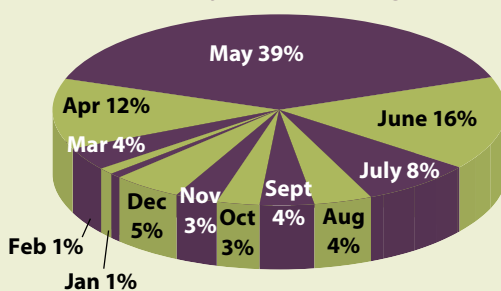
Payment & Registers

CREDIT CARDS 80%; **CHECK** 10%; **CASH** 8%; **IN-HOUSE CHARGE** 2%
NUMBER OF REGISTERS YEAR ROUND 2; Peak season - 3
POS SYSTEM SLICE

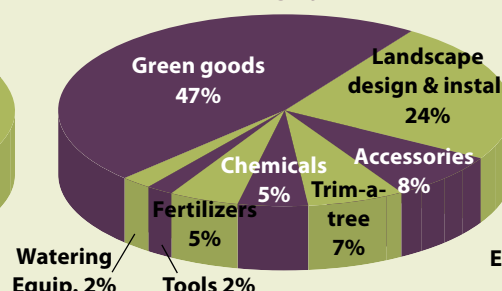
Industry Associations/Group Affiliations

Northwest Nursery Buyers Association

Monthly Sales Percentages



Product Category Breakout



Advertising Expenditures: 3% of total sales

