

IGC

Independent Garden Center Magazine

SINCE 1955, INDEPENDENT AND PROUD OF IT!

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2016

IGC SHOW FROM THE IGC SHOW  OFFICIAL PUBLICATION



CORNELL FARM, PORTLAND, OR
IGC VISIONARY RETAILER:
'Keeping It Real'



*"I couldn't find any
plants on your website.
You do sell them,
right?"*

NetPS
Plant Finder Tool

The #1 Online Plant Database for Nurseries and Garden Centers

204.782.4147

www.netpsplantfinder.com

sales@northscaping.com

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

ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED

2873 Saber Drive
Clearwater, FL 33759



CORNELL FARM

keeping it real

The Blatter family at Cornell Farm
(pictured, from left): Berkeley,
Ranann, Deby, Zoe and Ed

REGISTER TODAY!
www.GardenCentersofAmerica.com
GCA SUMMER TOUR STOP!
SEE CORNELL FARM IN PERSON
JUNE 26-29, PORTLAND, OR
FULL LIST OF STOPS ON PAGE 11

Their deep-rooted, genuine love of plants, and sharing that joy with their customers, is what moved Ed Blatter and Deby Barnhart to build Cornell Farm. Now, their children carry on their mission with their own unique Millennial perspectives and contributions to the business.

Conventional wisdom may frown upon Deby Barnhart and Ed Blatter, life partners and owners of Cornell Farm, who built their nursery among the hills and rocks of their 5.5 acres on a busy road in Portland, OR.

Some of the best and brightest in the industry told Deby and Ed they should level it all with a bulldozer and start over from scratch with a grand plan. But that's the last thing they would ever consider. The land has been in Ed's family since his grandfather relocated his dairy operation to the property in 1926, raising cows, then goats and later strawberries.

Over nearly three decades, Deby and Ed have beautifully worked around the farm's hills, underground boulders of volcanic rock and historic buildings. They have turned their patchwork layout into a real advantage, offering customers a genuinely pleasurable, peaceful exploration through the handiwork of a hard-working, creative, plant-loving family.

"What I hear from customers is the atmosphere here is not like a typical store," Deby says. "It becomes an exploration. It becomes more of a free-flow adventure."

Deby and Ed play up that vibe. They want to offer customers a more specialized experience certainly than that of a box store, but also one that differs from a larger, more streamlined and highly visible retail greenhouse. "That's already out there," Deby says. "We still have people who drive from Seattle and love this place the best."

And it's working. Since they opened in 1987, sales have increased steadily each year, except for a few recession years. They increased nearly 12 percent in 2014 to \$3 million and about another 12 percent in 2015.

Cornell Farm is poised to grow even stronger as Deby and Ed's three children, all Millennials, assume more prominent roles in the business, bringing their real-world strengths of merchandising, horticultural therapy, design and marketing to the IGC retail table.

'Genuine' Matters to Millennials & Customers of All Ages

Appealing to Millennials boils down to three key things, says Berkeley Blatter, Merchandising Manager and Buyer for Cornell Farm. It's about constant visual change, absolutely knowing the correct product information and genuinely engaging with these young customers.

A creative Millennial herself, Berkeley constantly searches through images on Instagram, browses through magazines and visits specialty retailers, getting a feel for what appeals to customers of all ages, and the 20- and 30-somethings in particular.

"We change displays in the store every couple of weeks," Berkeley says. "We always have something new and interesting. I don't use the displays given by the vendors - I always create something." She continues, "The one comment we get all the time is, 'It's so inspiring to be here,' and I swear they're here every week looking for another idea."

Berkeley says IGC retailers should expect Millennials to use technology to check information on the spot, so it's imperative to know your product inside and out. "Don't tell Millennials something false about that plant, because they'll know," she warns. "They have access to tons of information. A lot of customers come to us because they know they'll get the truth and an answer."

continued on page 20

CORNELL FARM

The Blatter family at Cornell Farm
(pictured, from left): Berkeley,
Ranann, Deby, Zoe and Ed



keeping it real

REGISTER TODAY!
www.GardenCentersofAmerica.com
GCA SUMMER TOUR STOP!
SEE CORNELL FARM IN PERSON
 JUNE 26-29, PORTLAND, OR
 FULL LIST OF STOPS ON PAGE 31

Their deep-rooted, genuine love of plants, and sharing that joy with their customers, is what moved Ed Blatter and Deby Barnhart to build Cornell Farm. Now, their children carry on their mission with their own unique Millennial perspectives and contributions to the business.

Conventional wisdom may frown upon Deby Barnhart and Ed Blatter, life partners and owners of Cornell Farm, who built their nursery among the hills and rocks of their 5.5 acres on a busy road in Portland, OR.

Some of the best and brightest in the industry told Deby and Ed they should level it all with a bulldozer and start over from scratch with a grand plan. But that's the last thing they would ever consider. The land has been in Ed's family since his grandfather relocated his dairy operation to the property in 1926, raising cows, then goats and later strawberries.

Over nearly three decades, Deby and Ed have beautifully worked around the farm's hills, underground boulders of volcanic rock and historic buildings. They have turned their patchwork layout into a real advantage, offering customers a genuinely pleasurable, peaceful exploration through the handiwork of a hard-working, creative, plant-loving family.

"What I hear from customers is the atmosphere here is not like a typical store," Deby says. "It becomes an exploration. It becomes more of a free-flow adventure."

Deby and Ed play up that vibe. They want to offer customers a more specialized experience certainly than that of a box store, but also one that differs from a larger, more streamlined and highly visible retail greenhouse. "That's already out there," Deby says. "We still have people who drive from Seattle and love this place the best."

And it's working. Since they opened in 1987, sales have increased steadily each year, except for a few recession years. They increased nearly 12 percent in 2014 to \$3 million and about another 12 percent in 2015.

Cornell Farm is poised to grow even stronger as Deby and Ed's three children, all Millennials, assume more prominent roles in the business, bringing their real-world strengths of merchandising, horticultural therapy, design and marketing to the IGC retail table.

'Genuine' Matters to Millennials & Customers of All Ages

Appealing to Millennials boils down to three key things, says Berkeley Blatter, Merchandising Manager and Buyer for Cornell Farm. It's about constant visual change, absolutely knowing the correct product information and genuinely engaging with these young customers.

A creative Millennial herself, Berkeley constantly searches through images on Instagram, browses through magazines and visits specialty retailers, getting a feel for what appeals to customers of all ages, and the 20- and 30-somethings in particular.

"We change displays in the store every couple of weeks," Berkeley says. "We always have something new and interesting. I don't use the displays given by the vendors - I always create something." She continues, "The one comment we get all the time is, 'It's so inspiring to be here,' and I swear they're here every week looking for another idea."

Berkeley says IGC retailers should expect Millennials to use technology to check information on the spot, so it's imperative to know your product inside and out. "Don't tell Millennials something false about that plant, because they'll know," she warns. "They have access to tons of information. A lot of customers come to us because they know they'll get the truth and an answer."

continued on page 20





The goal, Berkeley says, is to help Millennial customers be successful. So at Cornell Farm, plants for containers are often displayed by color alongside other plants that look great in combination - as customers can see from a house-designed container near the display. Or the staff will gladly design and plant the customer's container.

Independent garden centers need to be down-to-earth with Millennials, says Berkeley. Don't show them botanical names - just simple, quick information. Describe the plant by what it can do and its benefits.

When it comes to houseplants, Millennials are crazed about miniature succulents, terrariums and air plants. They are easy to maintain and inexpensive - and they keep getting smaller, says Berkeley. They also want plants that clear the air. They'll seek out plants that have a reputation for ridding the air of toxins like chemicals off-gassed from new carpeting.

Take the product suggestions of Millennials seriously, she says. Nobody likes their inquiry or suggestion to be dismissed. "Customers are the greatest window into what they are looking for," Berkeley says. If it's an unfamiliar product, research it. If it's a good product, stock some, and if it's a bad product, educate the customer - without talking down to them, says Berkeley.

Engage genuinely with Millennials, says Berkeley. When she enters a store and is greeted by someone who says, "You know we're having a sale today," she immediately wonders whether the salesperson is making a judgment about her purchasing ability based on her clothing.

"One of the biggest things you can do to hurt sales is judge a person by how much they're going to pay," Berkeley says. "Look at every customer like they are going to spend a million dollars. Give the best customer service, real customer service with each person, that's how you form a relationship."

No matter what's going on in their lives, people of all ages feel uplifted after wandering Cornell Farm for a while.

Connecting with people is not about how much they'll buy, says Deby, "it's about what they are doing in their life and how we can be relevant to that. It's about how we can have a genuine lifelong relationship so that we can make their life better in whatever way that is,"

She considers positively influencing people with the nursery experience and its plants her mission in life. "It's making someone happy because they can put in the most beautiful border of annuals after we helped them pick just the right colors for their daughter's wedding or their own landscape," Deby says. "Or it's helping somebody who gets out of the car and you say, 'Hello,' but they don't respond so you just go about your business. Then a few minutes later, they come back - they can't look you in the eye - and they say, 'I need something put together to bury my son.'"

"I've had many customers tell me whenever they feel down, they come here," Deby says. "Maybe part of it is because my staff and I pay attention to them about what they are trying to do that day."

Eye on the Cutting Edge

At Cornell Farm, green goods make up 72 percent of sales, and almost all the plants are grown on-site in seven production greenhouses. The assortment reflects the influence of demand from Millennials and eco-conscious consumers in one of the country's most environmentally aware cities.

"We want to be on the cutting edge," Deby says. "And to do that, we can't look back. It's a lot of cherry-picking."

That means carrying the newest plants, particularly specialty edibles, since edibles don't seem to be waning one bit, according to Deby. Sales of edibles and other kitchen garden plants grew 10 percent from 2013 to 2014.

"It seems like a bottomless pit, because I see our children's generation coming at it full force. They want to know where the natives are," Deby says. Customers of all ages are also seeking pollinator-friendly plants, and they're pursuing third-party certification of their pollinator gardens.

Cornell Farm's "kitchen garden" greenhouse spills over with one specialty edible after

another not typically found in Portland, like okra and peanuts. "We decided to go very deep in veggies because of how big they are," Deby says. "We have a lot of varieties and something unusual in every category."

She continues, "To reflect the strong interest in buying local, we are looking a lot closer to home for whatever we can, especially in garden art."

That extends to garden supplies, too - for example, coil hoses made by Water Right in Willamette Valley, about 30 miles southwest of Portland. After a period of being made overseas, Water Right's hoses are now made locally of polyurethane that is free of lead, phthalates and BPA, and they use a proprietary coil technology.

The farmhouse, which sits on the only flat part of the Cornell Farm's property, is also getting ready for a change. It is a lovely space, with ample rooms, clean lines, plenty of sunlight and hardwood floors. Soon, a new cafe will fill that space. Deby and Ed have hired a professional baker to run a breakfast and lunch cafe there, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., seven days a week.

The menu will be simple, with espresso drinks, pastries and a couple of breakfast sandwiches early in the day, and a simple roasted turkey sandwich and salad offered at lunch. Meals will range from \$10 to \$12, and the chef will use ingredients from the edibles section of the retailer's new demonstration

continued on page 23

igc retailer vital stats

cover story exclusive



Business Summary

BUSINESS FOUNDED 1987
RETAIL LOCATION Portland, OR
ANNUAL GROSS SALES \$3.4 million estimated
PERCENTAGE RETAIL 98%
PERCENTAGE LANDSCAPE DESIGN 2%
CUSTOMER COUNT Up 12%
AVERAGE SALES TREND Up 3%
AVERAGE SALE PER CUSTOMER \$74

Local Market

CUSTOMER RADIUS, IN MILES 5 miles, Portland metro area (drawing some customers from Eugene, Seattle, Tri-Cities)
NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN RADIUS 342,000
NUMBER OF GARDEN CENTERS IN RADIUS 4
NUMBER OF BOXES AND MASS MERCHANTS THAT SELL L&G IN RADIUS 15

Estimated Space Allocation

TOTAL RETAIL 40,000 square feet
OUTDOOR SALES 30,000 square feet

INDOOR SALES 7,000 square feet
RETAIL GREENHOUSE 5,500 square feet - Nexus
LANDSCAPE STAGING 5,000 square feet
STORAGE WAREHOUSE 3,000 square feet
TOTAL PRODUCTION AREA 27,000 square feet
DISPLAY GARDENS 7,000 square feet
NUMBER OF PARKING SPACES 35 paved, 50 gravel

Hours of Operation

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

Employees

FULL-TIME Off season - 16, Peak season - 22, **PART-TIME** Off season - 4, Peak season - 6 **DEPARTMENT MANAGERS** 4, **OFFICE STAFF** 2

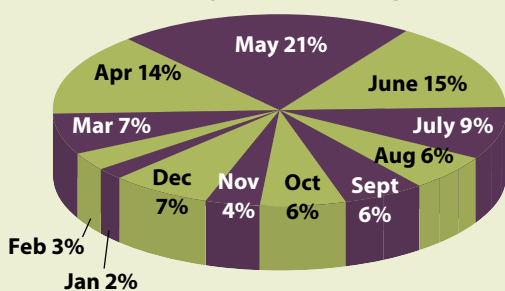
Payment & Registers

CREDIT CARDS 95%; **CASH** 5%
NUMBER OF REGISTERS YEAR ROUND 2; Peak season - 3
POS SYSTEM IN USE CounterPoint

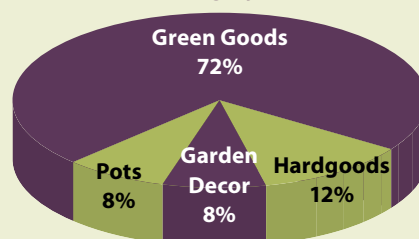
Industry Associations/Group Affiliations

Garden Centers of America, Northwest Nursery Buyers Association

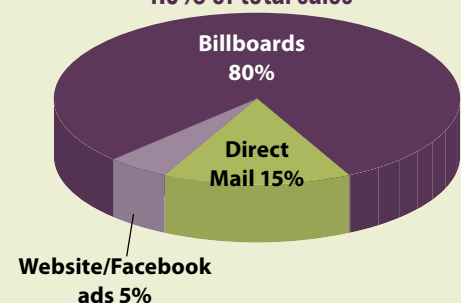
Monthly Sales Percentages



Product Category Breakout



Advertising Expenditures: 1.5% of total sales



garden, although quantities will likely not be large enough to fully supply the cafe.

"We've seen such continual lobbying from customers that we should turn the house into a cafe, so by popular demand, we're doing it," Ed says. "We see what they're looking for, and we're trying to give it to them."

As another improvement, to help with parking, Deby and Ed hired a valet service for the busiest days in the spring. The valets also loaded cars and replaced carts, keeping things moving, says Ed.

Once customers realize the parking service is free and gratuity-free, it should only work better, he says. "If we need full-time valets to park customers' cars because the cafe is so successful," he says, "we'll do it."

All In the Family

Deby and Ed share a commitment to stewardship of the land. Deby's father worked for the forest service, and she grew up appreciating nature. Cornell Farm developed from a roadside retail stand that first sold wreaths, then geraniums on the family farm.

"We wanted to evolve with the landscape," Deby says. "We didn't want the landscape of the place to disappear. We did it as we went. We didn't go into debt to do anything. We didn't have any grand scheme."

Ed, who handles the overall financials and the growing operation, can build anything.

Their son, Zoe, who often works with Ed on building projects, earned a degree in product design and handles social media marketing. "When Zoe was in grade school, he was the computer person for his teachers, and in junior high school, he designed a website for us," Deby says. "Now he does the website, the e-blast and helps with marketing."

Their younger daughter, Ranann, became the first Oregon State University graduate in the newly developed horticultural therapy program in spring 2013.

Berkeley, their eldest child, earned a degree from Oregon State in merchandising management with an emphasis on interiors. She manages the garden shop, including the buying and merchandising. "She is extremely visual, very aware, on the Internet all the time," Deby says. "I'm so grateful we have her mentality in the business right now, because she knows what to do."

Soon, it will be onto the next project, which is under discussion. One of the ideas is to find a spot to open a second location.

"We are never going to move from our current Cornell Farm location," says Ed. "We have deep roots here." He admits a second location without as many topographical challenges is appealing. "We've done the non-retailable location," he says. "I think I'd go for the total retail location and figure out how to sell what we sell in a completely high-end retail environment."

- Lisa Duchene, IGC Retail Correspondent

