

## Features

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## Building On Experience

*Ellen C. Wells*

With multiple locations comes multiple experiences. Armstrong Garden Centers, which owns and operates 49 garden centers on both coasts, has the new construction and renovation game down to a science. They have store designs that fit the Armstrong brand on the West Coast (32 stores) and the Pike Nurseries brand in the South (17 stores). They can implement those designs as new buildings or renovations of existing structures. And they know that the project will take no more than 5.5 months from the day the first piece of equipment is set on raw land to the day the doors open.

I interviewed Mike Chapman, Armstrong's vice president of real estate and visual merchandising to learn what it takes to replicate construction and renovation success site after site.

**Green Profit:** Where is the first place you start?

**Mike Chapman:** We start by looking for areas without coverage that match our customer demographics. We then look to see what land is available that suites our needs from a space stand point. We then drill down further into the demographics looking primarily at population density and household value. We compare this data to similar existing stores to see if the location would be profitable. It is truly all about location, location, location!

**GP:** is there anything different with the process of renovating a building compared to building from scratch?

**MC:** A lot of times there are more leniencies with ordinances and things of that nature when you do a renovation versus from the ground up. Lots of things are grandfathered in that aren't typically allowed with new construction. From the actual process standpoint, sometimes a renovation can be more difficult because you don't know what you are getting into until you get into it! You find obstacles along the way that you didn't really anticipate.

**GP:** What are some good tools or procedures to keep the process going forward smoothly?

**MC:** Contractor selection is key in driving the process, for sure! On top of that, we are constantly monitoring the schedule and deliverables. In conjunction with this, having a complete, comprehensive set of plans makes life easier for everyone. It's critical to look at as many details as possible in the beginning so there are as few

change orders as possible to help keep the project on budget.

**GP:** Who needs to be contacted regarding rules/zoning/restrictions and so forth?

**MC:** Each city is different and has its own zoning restrictions. It's very important to know and understand relevant zoning standards as you design the facility. You typically start with the city planner to get the ball rolling and they will put you in touch with the proper people and departments in their organization.

**GP:** What is the most surprising part of the process?

**MC:** Most surprising is how different each city can be regarding their zoning and ordinances. Some cities are more regimented than others and they all have different focuses. Also surprising is how accepting most cities are to receiving a garden center into their community. For the most part, we have been well received and considered an improvement in most communities.

**GP:** What has been an important lesson you've learned from previous new store projects that you'll carry forward to future projects?

**MC:** Making sure all details are ironed out in the planning phase to reduce change orders that cost time and money in the long run. Staying on top of the schedule is key, as well. You must inspect what you expect! Soil testing is key to prevent unexpected costly surprises in developing the land.

**GP:** What's your No. 1 tip you'd give to others?

**MC:** Contractor selection is key, as is managing the process by staying in touch with the contractor throughout the process! Do extensive soil reports to make sure there is no underground rock to contend with.

**GP:** What wouldn't you wish on your worst enemy?

**MC:** I would not wish an unresponsive, unproductive contractor nor tons of rain or underground rock on anyone! **GP**



*Pike Nurseries' newest location is in Matthews, North Carolina. Opened in October, this design is slightly different from the red brick façade and tower design of many Pike locations, reflecting their need to comply with location regulations.*