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## Taking it Full Circle

*Judy Sharpton*



Since Tangletown Gardens opened in 2003 on a busy in-town street corner in Minneapolis, much has been written about the store's size and its success. On

my first visit to the store on a tour in 2005, Dean Engelmann and Scott Endres greeted me with, "You aren't going to like this!"

And I tried not to!

The store is inside a fenced and gated city block that once upon a time was a gas station. When the garden center opened, the only parking was on the street. It was nearly impossible to use a shopping cart. The only concrete was on the sidewalk. Deliveries came in one gate off a main street. Clearly, this was a consultant's nightmare.

But here's the real story: Tangletown made budget in its first year, and Scott and Dean have never looked back. In fact, they continue to look, not exactly forward, but at the full circle.

(By the way, Tangletown was the only garden store on that tour where I bought something. I buy something every time I go. Now I even buy lunch. But that's later in this full-circle story.)

When I saw the store on that first tour, I didn't know the word "repurposed." I did know, however, that Dean and Scott were using the space to its max. My recent training from the U.S. Green Building Council informs me that the greenest building is one that's already built. The repurposed and renovated 1939 Pure Oil Station is chocked full, using every bit of vertical and horizontal space to display every form of gardener's delight. Surrounding the main building, a collection of pergolas gives form to the circular shopping area. The entire

rear shopping space is shaded by urban-pride trees that provide sales space for such treats as the rare showy lady's slipper (the Minnesota state flower) and Australian tree fern. It's clear the store appeals both to the Latin-speaking plant nerd and the Gen X urban rooftop gardener. Everything is offered in 4-in. pots or larger. I have never seen a flat of anything at Tangletown. I'm starting to like this place.

## **Down on the Farm**

Supporting Tangletown Gardens from the start is a full growing operation about 30 minutes west of the store's urban street corner. Tangletown Gardens supplements what they grow with selected plant material from the industry's best suppliers and some of the smartest add-on products anywhere for their particular clientele.

What I also didn't know in 2005 is that the growing operation is actually located on the Engelmann family farm adjacent to an Engelmann family-owned dairy. Engelmanns have been farming around Plato, Minnesota, for generations. On a recent clear September morning, I met Dean Engelmann at the farm to discuss the garden center's development and the newly opened Wise Acre Eatery. As I drove onto the farm, I stopped to admire a portable coop stuffed with conversational turkeys. Beyond the collection of Thanksgiving on the hoof, I admired the 29 acres of carrots, corn, beans, tomatoes, peppers and every other ingredient a chef could dream of marching in neat rows across the nearby hillside. As Dean and I walked the farm, he continually used a circular hand motion to describe how the farm supports the garden center, Tangletown's landscape division, a 340-member Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program and the Wise Acre Eatery. And, he also detailed how each of those operations in turn supports the farm.

He had already checked the temperature of the compost pile where all the eggshells and vegetable scraps from Wise Acre Eatery and spent plants from Tangletown Gardens were cooking into the rich amendment that would keep the fields producing. Although the Tangletown Gardens Farm is not certified organic, Dean applies the sustainable practices he first learned from his father. Vegetable varieties are rotated to allow for enriching cover crops; composted manure from the future pork chops and rib eye steaks wallowing and grazing all around us goes back into the soil.

Some fortuitous circumstances add to the success of the full circle production: a USDA-certified slaughterhouse is nearby making it possible to harvest the meat grown on the farm for use in the restaurant. Dean and Scott, both farm boys and graduates of university agriculture and horticulture programs, understand the economics of farming on a global and a local scale. It is clear they have chosen local.



## Food for Thought

Driving from the Tangletown Gardens Farm to my date with the Friday lunch special at Wise Acre Eatery, I imagined the circle of trucks hauling ingredients for Chef Beth Fisher's specialties and returning with ingredients for Dean's compost pile.

Wise Acre Eatery is another repurposed structure, a 1950s-era Standard Oil Station. The building's most recent iteration was a frozen custard store; the frozen custard was made from a processed mix. The store failed. When the opportunity to buy the property across the street presented itself, Scott and Dean could not pass it up, if for nothing more than much-needed parking for the garden store. The farm was already supporting the CSA so it looked like all the ingredients were in place to create a farm-to-table eatery.

Not so fast! As Scott described the process of development, he, too, used that familiar circular hand motion. The objective was always to support Tangletown Gardens. Scott and Dean spent much time creating a concept and waiting for the right location and people that would extend the streetside presence of the garden store and the landscaping service, which is an equal part of the store's financial success. (How do you think those Australian tree ferns get onto that rooftop garden year after year? After all, in Minneapolis, an Australian tree fern is an annual.)

The exterior plantings at Wise Acre extend the garden center into the view of customers who may have never visited Tangletown Gardens. Further, the common 30-minute wait for a table at Wise Acre lends itself to a stroll across the street to Tangletown Gardens. Inside the Eatery, Wise Acre's walls are hung with the pocket planters and funky art sold across the street at Tangletown. As I tucked into a corner seat at the bar next to a young mother and son, tables of families, "ladies who lunch" and local businesspeople created a buzz through the open-air dining space. On the wall near the entrance to the take-out order space, the hands on a large repurposed clock announced that 85% of the food on offer that day was from the Tangletown Gardens Farm. As I savored a mix of salad greens garnished with tiny cherry tomatoes and a pickled egg and a creamy mushroom soup, the mother and son discussed the ingredients in their shared salad. I finished the meal with a scoop of the custard made fresh from Engelmann dairy products. Jars of pickled eggs and vegetables canned from the farm's late summer harvest enticed the eye to take home for the Minnesota winter. An Engelmann family pickle recipe fills several jars; Dean had told me about his grandmother's pickles. Conversations around me contained references to food memories, too.

Conscious of the urban dwellers' disconnect to the memory of a family farm, Tangletown Gardens invites customers to several events on the farm. Dean laughs that he has customers who will weed the vegetable fields for free just to spend time there. I understand. When I met Dean that morning on the farm, my first inclination was to apply for a job on the spot. The farm employs 12 people. By extension, the company employs an additional 75 at Tangletown Gardens and the Wise Acre Eatery.

Perhaps the most elegant example of the connection of the urban with the rural is the farm supper. Chef Beth Fisher and her team present guests at the farm with a multi-course supper. That's the traditional name for dinner; on the farm, dinner is served at noon. The Wise Acre menu takes note of this language distinction.

## Philosophy Comes Full Circle

After lunch, I joined Scott Endres under the shade trees at Tangletown Gardens to discuss the workings of the store and its philosophy. Just as Dean had done earlier on the farm, Scott used a circular hand motion to describe the store's relationship with the farm and the people who work in the organization. Language is telling: Scott talks about "guests," not customers. Making the store work is part of the circle, too. That streetside loading area accommodates multiple deliveries daily. The garden store doesn't have to be so chocked full as to be unshoppable because new plant material or items from the storage space on the farm can be delivered several times a day if needed. The plant material is maintained at the farm to retail-ready quality, leaving less need for maintenance by sales staff. They can take care of guests, not inventory.

In a period of extreme change in retail, three major trends have risen to prominence: local, authentic and not-so-big, all illustrated to perfection at Tangletown Gardens. These trends are supported by the dual realities of consumer expectations and fiscal management. Consumers want local products; garden centers must manage shipping costs and communicate their position as a local source. Consumers want authentic products from a transparent source; the grower/retailer segment of the garden center industry is in a unique position to capitalize on this trend with both ornamental and food products. Consumers want more compact and manageable shopping experiences. The not-so-big garden center can meet this consumer preference with an inviting shopping environment and on-demand fresh products. All these opportunities will require greater cooperation all along the supply chain. It will require a circle from supply to delivery.

Scott and Dean were wrong. I very much like Tangletown Gardens and the sustainable circle it represents. As I was leaving the store, I took one last look at the Showy lady's slipper, knowing it would never survive in my Savannah garden. A container of heirloom cherry tomatoes served as a substitute. I planned to add them to the cheese and bread I had bought at the St. Paul Farmer's Market for my train ride to Buffalo, New York. Some plan; they were gone before I got back to my hotel. **GP**

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