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## Dublin's Garden Retailers

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*Green Profit* traveled with the International Garden Center Association on its August 2014 tour of Irish garden centers. Based near Dublin at the Carton House Spa & Golf Hotel (once the ancestral seat of the Earl of Kildare and the Duke of Leinster, so you know we weren't roughing it), we spent five days visiting garden retailers, along with wholesale greenhouses, botanical gardens, estates, castles, Trinity College, a brewery, a distillery, a horse track, a stud farm, a sports stadium ... even a cemetery! Oh, we also had dinner with the President of Ireland, Michael Higgins. Needless to say, when it comes to colorful trips, this one was more than just green. Here are some highlights:



### What should an Irish garden center look like?

Low, with timber framing, a thatch roof and a leprechaun hiding by the pot of gold? Or some sort of soaring crystal palace? We didn't see either (although The Garden House's café does have a thatch roof). We saw standard greenhouse designs (arches and A-frames) anchoring relatively modern architecture of the sales buildings. Even the newest of Ireland's centers, Arboretum, didn't wow us with

über-modern ideas—just simple, clean efficiency.

With a mild climate, plant material featured for the fall was much like you'd find in England or the Pacific Northwest, leaning towards conifers and other evergreens, acers and azaleas, buxus and beech, heather and lavender, cyclamen and viola. Combos tend to be small and seasonal. We saw few hanging baskets. Also, since gardens tend to be compact, so do plants. You can buy large trees, but most of what's on display is sized for courtyards and urns.

At most centers, the emphasis seems to be on plant material. We visited in August so didn't witness the madness of spring, but it was obvious they make plants a priority in their layouts, unlike many of the newer English garden centers we've seen, which seem to emphasize home and fashion upon entry rather than plants. Note the covered shopping, common because in Ireland rain isn't a possibility, it's a certainty.



### One of the best ideas we found in Ireland.

This fence (*pictured*) serves as an attractive backdrop, while wood brackets hook over the horizontal braces to support adjustable shelves. Matching tables complete the look. That's Louisville, Kentucky, retailer Jim Wallitsch showing how the system works. Slick!

Beyond plants and standard garden hardgoods, Irish centers feature casual clothing, kitchen items, home decor and

gourmet food. Plus, that most English of inventions, the garden center café. Which, as in England, has gone quite upscale. A prime example is Rachel's Café at Arboretum Garden Center, which rivals any good restaurant for its hot food and baked-goods offerings.

Speaking of food, everyone's barbecue department features Weber grills, which seem to be the most popular outdoor cooking device on the planet.



South African retailer and IGCA Past President Nick Stodel used the term "Irishness" when describing these wonderful banners at Arboretum (*pictured*). The colors, art, font and quotes all combine to express the fun and quirky personality of the business. After reading such sentiments as "The thing children wear out faster than their clothes is their parents" (Visit Kids) and "Properly trained, a man can become a dog's best friend" (Visit Pets), you can't help but smile. The banner banter continues outside, with not only names of the plant categories, but a clever description of

what they offer the gardener, such as Cottage gardens (perennials): "We promise to flower every year" and Climbers: "Lets entwine for a good time." Even the kitchen department gets in on the fun.

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## Business in Ireland

Business picked up in 2014 thanks to a combination of favorable weather and an upturn of the economy in the Dublin area, and that momentum is expected to carry on to Christmas, says retailer Bryan Maher, who, with his wife, Mandy, runs The Garden House in County Dublin. Bryan has a broad perspective on business, thanks to previous garden center ownership and a former corporate career as a wholesale bicycle distributor.

Like most countries, Ireland has its share of mass marketers that retail plants. Says Bryan, strong competition from DIY sheds has abated slightly, but it is being replaced by very targeted competition from the German discount supermarkets.

“They do weekly special offers all at very low prices,” he says. The challenge for us is to change the conversation from price, where we cannot compete, to service, experience and quality.” To do this, he says, takes well-trained staff with personality and a strong café. “We also use classes as a tool to draw people in.”

I asked Bryan about trends he has noted at The Garden House, and he replied, “the decline of shrubs in favor of color from perennials and annuals.” Their customer tend toward small urban gardens, so they’re specializing more in container gardening.

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*Pictured:* A great bagged-goods display at Newlands Home & Garden Center. Bagged goods are priced by the distributor at “Buy two, get one free” (or other variations). To aid shoppers while encouraging buying the full offer, a cart in front of each pallet is preloaded with bags. No waiting for help, or getting dirty schlepping sacks, just push and go!

It’s tricky to compare euros to dollars, especially if you don’t know the cost of living. But using the “Big Mac Index,” an Irish six-pack of annuals selling for 3.99 euros (\$5.05), is just above the price of an Irish Big Mac (\$4.95), according to The Economist. In the U.S., a Big Mac currently averages \$4.80, so our annuals and burgers are similar in price. **GP**