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Cover Story

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A Lifetime of Retail Experience

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Cedar Rim Nursery

LOCATION: Langley, British Columbia, Canada

ESTABLISHED: 1978

SIZE: 10-acre retail greenhouse, 120-acre wholesale nursery

EMPLOYEES: Peak: 49 total; Offseason: 12

SALES BREAKDOWN:

Nursery Stock & Perennials 70%

Annuals 15%

Hardgoods: 6%

Giftware & Fashion 4%

Pottery, Misc.: 5%

AMANDA'S ROLE: General Manager is her main title, but she also works with the wholesale division, organizing shipping and receiving, as well as buying for all perennial and shrub liners for the wholesale division and hardgoods, soils and garden chemicals for the retail operation.

The garden retail road isn't an easy one. The way I see it, it takes three character traits to make a good go of it: a positive outlook, a solid work ethic and an eye for profitability. It's no surprise why, then, this year's Young Retailer Award Winner Amanda Bruce showed up in our nominations pile and took home the glass—she has all three in abundance.

She credits in no small measure the time spent growing up in the business, which gives her a great perspective on the many roles she now plays as general manager (and so much more) at Cedar Rim Nursery, a retail and wholesale operation in Langley, British Columbia, started 40 years ago by her parents, Russ and Trudy Bruce (who still own it today). It was that time spent working outside during her teenage years that made her realize this is the industry for her, and at 30-years-old, she shows no signs of changing her mind. Here, you'll read about her time

growing up in retail, what changes the operation has experienced and what she thinks of the future.

Diversifying the Day-to-Day

Cedar Rim has been known since Day One for its nursery stock and green goods, and it's particularly known for its plant selection—roses and other nursery stock all the way up to large caliper trees. It wasn't always a retail operation, though. Russ started it as a wholesale nursery, but as recession hit in the 1980s, he opened up to the general public. He later moved to the current location to open a larger retail store.

"The best selection of shrubs and trees—that's what he wanted to be known for," Amanda notes, adding new product lines have helped even out the valleys of garden retail. "We've definitely diversified a lot, especially to bring clientele in in the summer and in off months, so we've gone into the fashion and giftware—all the fun things. We've definitely broadened our selection to appeal to more of a general population. Each year, we try something new and try to offer more and more to all our clients.

"It's changing, but we still hold strong to our green roots."



A Changing Customer Base

One of the reasons the diversification is working is the evolution of the customer base. Langley is about 45 minutes from downtown Vancouver.

"Twenty years ago, Langley was more of a farm town, a smaller city," Amanda says, adding property values everywhere near them are rising. "I believe last year Langley was named one of the fastest-growing cities in Canada. Because property values in Vancouver are astronomical, people are moving east."

Because of that Vancouver migration, the demographic of the customer base is changing and the product mix is being tweaked constantly.

"We're definitely starting to see a lot more young people coming through the doors, a lot more young families," she says. "A lot of them haven't gardened before, but they get super excited, and after they have success, they get even more excited."

To accommodate new condominium, town home and smaller space single-family home dwellers, Cedar Rim has started carrying more balcony-style planters with unique plant material (not the same as the box stores) in nicer ceramic planters. About four to five years ago, they saw the coming wave and trends and began growing more columnar trees designed for smaller yards, as well as more dwarf shrub varieties. And, of course, they began carrying even more houseplants because, duh, houseplants.

Closing in December—GASP!

"We weren't making money—we were coming out behind," Amanda explains as the reason the retail operation started closing in December and January (the wholesale business stays open) about 15 years ago. "We evaluated it, we talked to staff at the time and they said, 'December and January off? Sweet, sign us up!' We said we'd do it as a trial and it worked so well; our staff was happy and we didn't lose customers—it didn't affect customers coming back the next year—so we continued to do it."

It's a bold move, but one that's worked out really well for them. Amanda says it serves a couple of purposes. One, they're not trying to compete with other stores in town that do a "phenomenal job at Christmas," and two, it gives

them a chance to take a break, regroup and get refreshed to get started in February. And while that doesn't sound like a big deal, for their staff it's been huge.

"When we open in February, we're all so pumped, we've had that rest time and you're ready to give it," she says. "You come back with a really good attitude, you know; you're rejuvenated, you're rested up. Retail can be trying at times and sometimes just having that break gives you the energy to go on for another season."

Growing Up in the Industry



When Amanda says garden retail is in her blood, she isn't kidding. Her maternal grandfather also owned a garden center in Langley and that's where her parents met. She spent her life around the operation, coming in on Saturdays and helping out on the cash registers at around 8 to 10 years old. At 12 she started working one day on a weekend and one during the week.

"Then I started thinking, 'Hmm, this isn't quite as exciting anymore,'" she says of her pre-teen years. But then, one summer when she was around 15 made the business click. "You find what you like at the store, and for me I started working outside one summer with the shrubs and trees, and I was like, 'Wow, this is really awesome.' So that's when I started to enjoy it."

Being a family member in the business meant fun came after the necessary work for the day. "My parents' home is one of the growing facilities," she says, recalling how most requests to knock off for fun went. "If you want to do this, go and weed for two hours then you can do that. It gave me the work ethic I have today."

She's not the only one in the family continuing on the tradition, either. She has three siblings and two work full time in the operation. Kelsey, her sister, runs the annuals department and does the purchasing there, as well as marketing and buying for the fashion and giftware departments. Her brother Jason takes care of the field-grown material and trees, but his biggest job is irrigation ("It's a full-time job," Amanda says). Amanda's youngest brother is currently a gold miner in the Yukon (yes, you read that right), but when he ventures home he still works in the garden center. Working with family is only something those who work with their family truly understand and Amanda says she's blessed to have this opportunity.

"I am so honored to have won this [Young Retailer] award, but I couldn't do what I do without my family," she says. "It's really a privilege to be able to work with them every day. We're a typical family, so you have moments, but the good moments are just awesome. It takes all of us to run this place and I'm really lucky to be able to do it with them."

The Challenges of Labor

When asked about the biggest challenge they've experienced in recent years, Amanda's answer was immediate: staffing. The economy around Langley—and by extension, Vancouver—is booming, but that's a double-edged sword for Cedar Rim. She struggled to find able bodies to fill pretty much any role, despite the fact that they decided a while back to pay above minimum wage.

"We looked at what Starbucks and other entry-level retail was offering and raised our wage above that to look a bit more appealing," she says. Right now minimum wage in British Columbia is $12.65, and by 2021 it will be $15.20, raised $1 each year in between. "The problem for us, too, is our season starts in April and universities aren't out until May. I hired students in May because I still hadn't filled the positions by then. It was a challenging spring."

And while it was a great spring profitability-wise, everyone working at the operation had to work that much harder

and longer to get the job done.

“It’s not just us, though; we talk to our landscape clientele and they are all struggling the same way,” Amanda says. “Our core group was phenomenal. They went above and beyond for us this year, and we’re still seeing the sales. Our group works really well together—it was really nice to see.”

Optimism for the Future

Just in talking with Amanda at the Young Grower/Young Retailer awards dinner in Columbus during Cultivate’18 and on the phone for this interview, it’s apparent she has an enthusiastic optimism that’s contagious. Even when speaking about challenges, she approaches it from a positive bent, complimenting the team that worked so hard to persevere through it all. That optimism continues when she talks about the future.

“For my store personally, I have a really positive feeling for the future,” she says. “There are so many things we want to do and change. Here, too, there are not as many garden centers as there were 10 to 15 years ago, so there’s so much opportunity in our marketplace.

“After touring a bunch of garden centers in the East there are so many ideas and so many stores doing such a good job. And there’s such a push to buy local—personally I think it’s really positive.”

Amanda says she sees so much value in being part of industry organizations to continue to drive growth, too. For example, Cedar Rim is part of the Garden Centre Group Co-Op in Canada (not to be confused with the U.S. version). It’s a member-owned buying and networking cooperative, and it’s allowed Amanda and others at Cedar Rim to compare notes with other similar retailers in the country.

“A lot of them have really successful, beautiful stores and I’m working alongside other younger people,” she notes, adding many times she’s working with people her own age as the next generation in their businesses. “It’s been a fantastic experience and I’ve learned so much from all the stores in there.

“The industry as a whole is so much fun. I really enjoy all the people you get to meet,” she adds. “Growing up in it definitely makes me have a great appreciation for it, too.” **GP**