greenPROFIT

Features

1/1/2022

Serving a “Garden-Forward” Community

Jennifer Polanz

The Botany Shop in South Bend, Indiana, is truly a labor of love that’s been formulating in the mind of owner Benjamin Futa since, oh, 4th or 5th grade. And he has the receipts to prove it … well, his parents do.

“When I grow up I will go to Bloomington College. I will learn to be a horticulturist,” Ben reads from a cell phone picture of his elementary school essay, laughing. “It is very interesting to be a gardener. I will have a greenhouse and I will make my money from a garden store. I will install sprinkler systems in gardening places.

“So, you know, it’s something that’s been in the back of my head for a long time to do something like this. And what I enjoyed most about public horticulture was talking to people.”

That’s where Ben got his start, in public gardens—most recently in Madison, Wisconsin—before he and his partner, Paul, moved back to their hometown of South Bend. Ben started the shop as a pop-up in the spring of 2021 in the restaurant of a family friend and Paul continued his career in social work at a local hospital while also working with Ben at the pop-up.

Ben displayed plants and wares on tables that were purposefully left empty for social distancing, sometimes even bussing tables when he wasn’t selling plants. But COVID cases began dropping and restaurant foot traffic picked up, signaling the time had come for Ben to find his own place.

He did, five minutes from their home in a renovated “sharespace” storefront that used to be a floral shop. “When I learned that, I thought, ‘If you believe in signs, that’s your sign—this is where we’re supposed to be.’”

Initially, he only had the front bay, but has since expanded and is now eyeing the empty vacant lot next door for outdoor sales and activities.

The shop is a mix of indoor houseplants and botanical-adjacent products. The goal was to select products that were made by small business owners, and local and regional makers. The product lines have ranged from food products (hit or miss, Ben says) to clothing, candles and self-care products—all either botanically inspired or infused. He sources from Faire, an Etsy-style site for wholesale products, as well as from local growers and makers they already had relationships with.

One way they’ve responded to the “garden-forward” nature of the community is to establish the Green Fund. Customers can add a tip to their purchase that goes into the fund. The money is distributed to beautification projects in the community.

“Our intention is to reinvest in community beautification projects and we have left that door wide open in terms of

what that means," Ben says. They also have a sign-up list where customers can volunteer to be a part of those beautification projects. "Those sort of pieces the neighborhood has responded really well to."



Pictured: Ben Futa in his recently expanded store, The Botany Shop. In the space behind Ben, there's a room that is being used for Drop-In Workshops. It's too small to be COVID-safe for larger workshops, but groups of 4 or 5 could safely gather together. Over the holidays, the shop ran weekly themes where customers could drop in and learn how to make a kokedama, an airplant wreath or a fresh greens wreath.

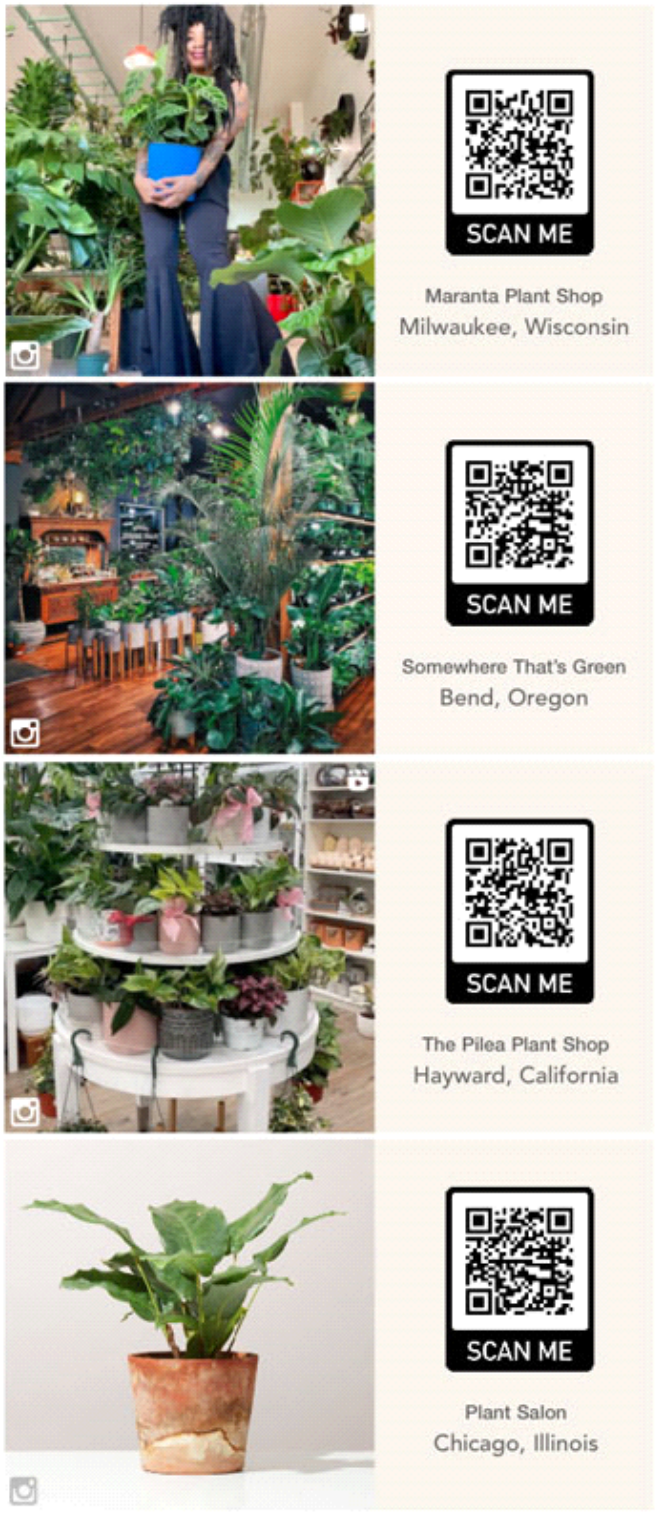
Some of the local makers for The Botany Shop include potters like Funky Fungi, and while their products are a little more expensive than other pottery, they're unique and have a story. Other regional producers include candles from True Hue in Minneapolis and simple syrups from Root 23 in Columbus, Ohio. During the holidays, Ben had several vendor showcases where the maker came in with other products they carry (for instance, a potter also makes butter dishes and other ceramics). A bonus to buying local: no excessive packing material waste.)

Pictured: The shop has been a true family affair. Ben's dad made the shelves for the plants in the window and even used wood from a tree on the property Ben grew up on to support the shelves.



Pictured: This Rose of Jericho is an example of how Ben works with customers to find the right plant for them. When a customer says, 'I kill everything' … "My answer is you haven't met the right plant yet," he says. "We just brought Rose of Jericho in … those have flown. But we did a social media post about 'you can't kill this.' But then also giving a little botany about how it grows natively and this is how it moves through the world. If you kill airplants you can probably keep this alive." Ben says they also found labeling plants based on toxicity was important to customers—it's one of the first questions they ask because of pets.





Pictured: Ben says these are his favorite plant shops to follow on Instagram for inspiration and solidarity:

Maranta Plant Shop—Milwaukee

Somewhere That's Green—Bend, Oregon

The Pilea Plant Shop—Hayward, California

Plant Salon—Chicago