

Features

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Feeling Plant-y

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Grow Geneva owner Laura Pettit has staked her business on creating strong relationships, with her suppliers, her staff, her customers and even her landlord. After nearly five years in business, it's definitely a winning strategy.

Picture: This is the room you walk into when you enter the shop. It's a lovely mix of plants, décor and gifts. The vibe is enhanced with jazzy music and the scent of a diffuser.

She started as a first-grade teacher (more on that in February's *buZZ!* e-newsletter) and created a side business restoring furniture. That led to owning a vintage shop in Sycamore, Illinois, where she lived and still resides. She expanded to open a small plant shop in Geneva called Grow, which sufficed until the great plant boom of the pandemic.

"I emailed my landlord—I love my landlord—and said 'Hey, Mike, in the next year or so we're going to be looking to expand,' but I only wanted to expand with him," she explained. "And I said if you have something that pops up in the next year or so that's bigger than what we have, and on this street, I'd love to look at it.

"He's like 'I've got something you can look at to-day.' I said, 'Well, crap.'"

It was rough timing, but a beautiful, much larger location in a well-traversed section of Geneva, which is home to several streets full of quaint, locally owned shops, restaurants and bars.



Pictured: Grow Geneva has an active social media presence, with 8,500 followers on Instagram. Multiple staff members, Laura included, monitor the social media channels daily, as well as a cell phone, for questions. They routinely answer multiple questions a day (but draw the line at answering questions via text sent from customers who are at a clearly marked big box store—true story).

"From the moment we signed the lease, we moved in here a month later," she said about the speedy move. "We closed the other shop for three

days, had a moving company come and bring everything but the plants. We sold out all the plants and had our buddies at Chicago Foliage deliver a whole semi-truck the day before we opened.”

Speaking of foliage broker Chicago Foliage, that’s another of her strong ties, along with G&E Greenhouses in Elburn, where she often stops on the way to work to load up the car with plants. They offer tropical foliage along with seasonal specialties.

When it comes to non-plant items in the shop, she sources them locally (she’s good friends with her goat’s milk soap maker) and through Faire, a wholesale website that specializes in small businesses.

Pictured: The Adopt Me shelf is discounted for plants that came in a bit smaller than the rest, or those that tipped in shipping and may have bent. They don’t want a plant to stay in the shop longer than two weeks, so if it’s been there too long, it goes to the Adopt Me shelf. That section usually turns over every two to three days, Laura said.



“I want to make sure that this is a shop that I would want to shop in,” she said. “And I want to be proud of what I sell.”

Her staff are a close group, too. Laura’s retail manager Britt Crowe is a social media specialist who she met while working on her financials at a local pub (the former shop was even too small to have an office)—Britt also worked out of the pub on her social media business. Now, there are multiple people working in the shop, but Laura said she hires more on vibe than anything else to ensure the team stays cohesive.



Pictured: Pets are definitely welcome in the shop and there are T-R-E-A-T-S behind the counter for good doggos (and for sale to take home, too). To protect those four-legged customers, they specify pet-friendly plants.

The team has their marching orders, too, from greeting customers to making the sale and ringing out.

“Every person who walks in here gets greeted in the exact same way; every person will be asked if they want a receipt,” she said, adding she contracts secret shoppers to help reinforce that need. “We have certain

phrasing that the secret shoppers will listen for. I want everyone who comes in to have the exact same experience here no matter who is working.”

Why is that so important? Because with houseplant shops, the margin for error is even smaller than in a garden center.

“Our goal, we are salespeople. I don’t hire cashiers, I hire salespeople,” she said, adding it’s even more nuanced than that. “We are very passionate about matching people with plants they’ll love.”

I asked her, too, if she had advice for anyone looking to get into the houseplant shop business. She had a couple of key suggestions:



- “Be unapologetic about the plants you get—make sure you don’t hesitate to say no, this isn’t the quality I want.”
- Don’t fall into trends. If you know your customers won’t buy it, don’t attempt it. However, sometimes products require explanations and demonstrations before customers decide they’ll love them.
- Become intimately aware of finances. Take a business class or find a mentor to help you with your budgeting. It’s the part of the business she admits she’s still figuring out and cites the book “Profit First” by Michael Michalowicz as a big help.

• It’s really easy to overbuy houseplants. During the pandemic, they couldn’t buy enough for Grow Geneva, but now that’s slowed down, so buying has to be commensurate with demand.

Pictured: Retail Manager Britt Crowe and Owner Laura Pettit take a quick break from helping customers to pose for us. The shop is open seven days a week, which is more than most shops in Geneva. Many are closed on Mondays, but Laura said that actually drives traffic to them.

You have to stay in tune with what your customers want. Laura found offering a repotting service is popular among her customers, which comes with an appropriate charge based on the materials and time needed. In fact, during the summer they set up a tent out front for a week and made \$3,000 in repotting fees.



In the end, it’s all about the quality and providing a consistent experience for repeat shoppers, of which she has many.

“My entire reputation hinges on ‘is this going to live for the customer,’” she said. “If I give them something that’s going to die, they don’t come back. They automatically think they’re not a plant person.

“We have an insane amount of return customers. I’d rather have a shop with 1,000 great plants than 10,000 mediocre plants.” **GP**

Pictured: The store also posts products online for sale, including a monthly plant club for locals, gifts that can be shipped across the country, and purchase of classes and events.

Take a Tour: [Come along with us for a video tour of Grow Geneva.](#)