

Features

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Embracing Boutique Retail

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I met My Secret Garden owner Sonya Harrison at The Garden Center Group Fall Event in Kansas City and I knew immediately I wanted to visit her retail location (I actually thought I'd already visited for some reason). If it had half the personality she did, it would be a great retail shop, indeed!

When I booked my trip to Atlanta for market in January, I reached out and Sonya graciously invited me to visit. And while it was January and not peak spring, I was not disappointed—I could still see all the charm and beauty the 1-acre suburban location had to offer. A lovely landscaped waterfall and pond highlighted her landscape background and current design offerings. In fact, the landscape design portion of the business will account for about 60% of sales this year, with retail making up the rest.

Pictured: For a time during 2020, Sarah Dietrich (left) was owner Sonya Harrison's (right) only employee.

• High-end signage adds to the boutique ambiance.

Sonya's owned the business for eight years—she was initially hired by the landowner to liquidate products from the former Hastings Wholesale that had re-located to the property in Peachtree Corners (which was previously Hastings Nature & Garden Center and part of

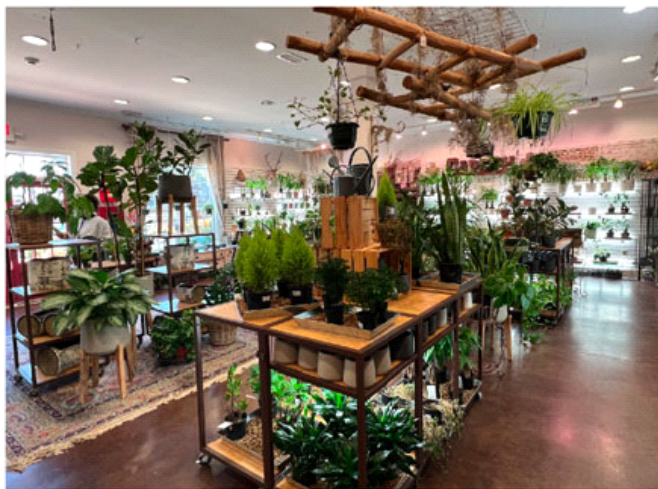
the iconic Hastings Seed Company). Once she successfully sold off the product, he convinced her to stay.

"I think you need to open up a store, Sonya," she recounted him saying. "If I make you a really good deal and give you everything that's left, will you open up a store here? I think you need to open up a garden center.

"I didn't even know how to do a purchase order. I didn't even know how to take a credit card—I had to ask my first customer to do cash!"

From those humble beginnings she began running her landscape design and then more retail out of the space, building it slowly at first and letting customers find her. She went to her first Garden Center Group Fall Event in 2019 and joined the group in 2020—just in the nick of time.

"It was great because if it wasn't for Danny—he's a great team leader—I would have just been at my wit's end not knowing what to do," she said of Group Executive Director Danny Summers, who, along with AmericanHort and other industry members, quickly drafted verbiage retailers could use to stay open as essential businesses at the start of the COVID pandemic. "I joined in January and unbeknownst to me there was a storm coming and they were my little shelter from the storm. They weren't just an umbrella, they were the shelter!"



Pictured: Interior fixtures are on wheels to make them mobile for quick rearranging.

- *The location is the site of a former Hastings Wholesale location, and Sonya has kept many of the seed catalogs (these date back to 1928!), seed order record books and even a portrait of the Hastings founder as a reminder of the place's deep history.*
- *Customers who spend more than \$300 receive a pair of custom garden gloves with the My Secret Garden logo on them as a thank you for their patronage.*

From being unsure if she could even open in 2020 to having an onslaught of customers (with only one other employee who had just started—Sarah Dietrich), the COVID years saw more foot traffic and higher sales. Then, 2022 switched gears and resulted in a decrease in customer count, but only a slight decrease in sales.

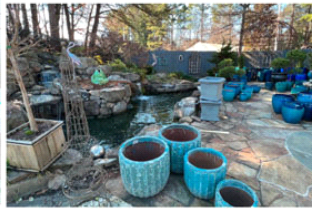
That's because she consulted with Group service provider Tim Quebedeaux of RetailKPI Consulting. His advice allowed her to reduce her cost of goods sold (COGS) while increasing her margins and profits.

"He's taught me a lot about how to ebb and flow my inventory levels according to my sales," she said.

Sonya saw an interesting phenomenon happen in 2022, also: for the first time her top sellers flipped and she sold more tropicals than annuals. Next came perennials, then shrubs and trees. So what does she think will happen this year?

"I'm thinking, since it's a recession, people are going to do a lot more perennials," she said. "They want it to last longer. I think that's probably where we're going."





Customers will also be getting even more support this year, as Sonya and her team have been working for nearly a year on creating care guides that will get emailed to buyers with their receipts. Landscape customers also get the care guides for all their plant selections. And they're working on providing online photos and descriptions of the store's offerings so customers can peruse the website before coming to the store. And while an online storefront may be an option, most customers choose to meander the property to find their selections while also enjoying the

ambiance (and, of course, petting Simba, the garden center cat). **GP**

Pictured: It took Sonya five days to create this crate wall painted in two different colors with crates from IKEA. It's an eye-catching backdrop in the gift and houseplant shop.



- *Lighting helps sell products and Sonya has LED light strips at the back of these clear shelves to spotlight the pots below.*
- *The design part of the business is highlighted partially through this lovely landscaped pond and waterfall, with pots nearby for a complete outdoor look.*
- *Sonya creates a boutique atmosphere with lovely accents and custom bags.*
- *You never know what you're going to find at My Secret Garden, including a party with music and llamas in costume!*
- *One of the big attractions for kids at My Secret Garden (aside from the koi in the pond) is Simba, the friendly garden center greeter who has numerous napping spots throughout the location.*

