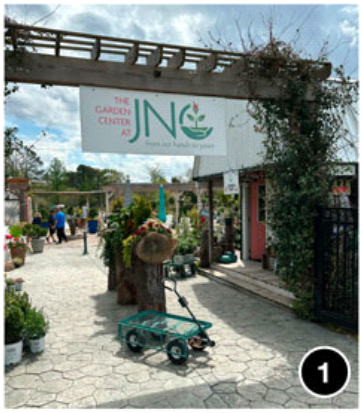
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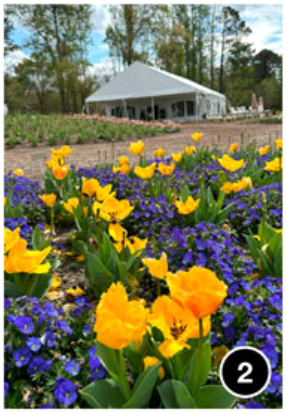
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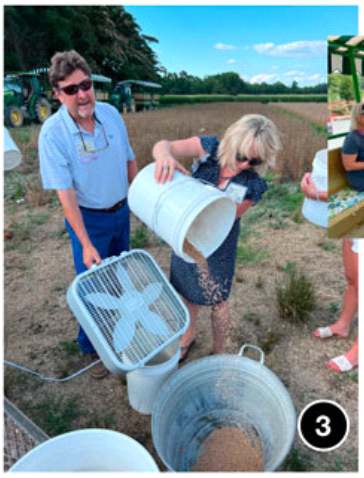
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Four Ways The Garden Center at Johnson Nursery Delights Customers

Katie Elzer-Peters









Johnson Nursery is a familiar name along the East Coast of the U.S. from Massachusetts to Georgia—as a wholesale grower. In 2018, they opened a small direct-to-consumer garden center at their Southeast North Carolina production facility. What started as a nice awning flanked by two very small buildings for administrative work and a few gift and plant care items and benches covered with Johnson's gorgeous plants has grown into a delightful fully fledged, plant-forward garden center that draws customers from 45 to 90 miles away, especially for their seasonal events.

Why start a garden center an hour away from a significant metro area? Chason Johnson, Director of Marketing and son of founders David and Jill Johnson, said, "We wanted to learn how to make retail work. We figured if we could do it in Willard, we could help people anywhere."

They've learned plenty over the years, and walked me through it at their Winterfest event in December and last month, well into the spring season. Let's take a stroll.

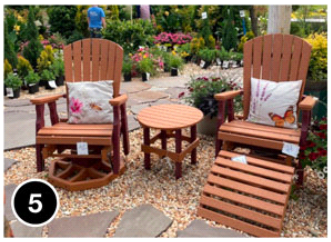
1&7 | Spotlight on the Plants

While some garden centers invest millions in buildings and the plants can seem like they're playing second fiddle, Johnson lets the plants be the stars. Fixtures throughout are made from rough-hewn logs upcycled from around the property and the whole garden center is a series of garden rooms walled off and decorated with—you guessed it—plants. Poking around feels like a little treasure hunt. There's always something new around the corner.

3&4 | Creating the Draw

Because of their rural location 30 minutes to over two hours away from bigger metro areas, Johnson pulls out all the stops for multiple seasonal events all year long. (Visit their website for a full listing.)

Two of the more innovative events are the Tour de Plants and Grain to Oven workshops. Groups can book private Tour de Plants experiences that include a behind-the-scenes tour of the production nursery in a festive floral wagon, a walking tour of the garden center and snacks. The Grain to Oven activity features a lecture from Brie Arthur, author of “Gardening with Grains,” and hands-on grain harvesting, winnowing, grinding and making into pizza baked in the two pizza ovens that Johnson built onsite. Here you see owner David Johnson help winnow grain.







2&5 | A Blend of Beauty and Retail

The Johnson Nursery campus has three main parts: the production nursery, the garden center and The Gardens of Southeastern North Carolina, a botanical garden started by David Johnson that’s adjacent to the garden center. When starting a public garden, it helps to grow more than 1,600 beautiful plant varieties next door. The garden center flows seamlessly into the public garden with woodland areas and annual flower showcases that serve as inspirational eye candy for visitors. Both the Gardens and the garden center showcase plants at their best, either to photograph or purchase, and each area has plenty of seating for guests to sit and ponder their purchases.

6 | Listening to Customers

The real key to the garden center’s success is how closely attuned they are to their specific customers’ needs. Because of its location, customers are on serious missions when they come to shop. Johnson staff encourages them to bring pictures and measurements of their yard, and spends time with individual customers to help them “get it done.” If something is out of stock at the garden center, a staff member is dispatched to the nursery to retrieve it.

Why a picture of pots to talk about customers? Johnson is plant-forward. Anything else in stock is in service to people getting more enjoyment out of their plants—well-crafted furniture, the best soil amendments and high-end self-watering pots. While other local(ish) garden centers stopped carrying this line, it’s a best seller for Johnson. Customers will drive from 50 miles away to load up. **GP**

Scroll the Johnson Nursery Instagram profile for more pictures and videos of their events, gardens and merchandising.

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