

## Features

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## Highlights of the Cultivate'23 Retail Tour

*Jennifer Polanz*

I spent a couple of days this spring right after Mother's Day Weekend checking out the four stops on this year's Cultivate'23 Retail Tour by AmericanHort. In case you missed it (or found this before the tour got underway), I've provided some key highlights from the four Ohio stops: Petitti Garden Centers—Avon; the flagship Bremec Garden Center location in Chesterland; Breezewood Gardens & Gifts in Chagrin Falls; and Suncrest Gardens in Peninsula. They each offer a unique take on garden retail (and some ancillary businesses you might find interesting, too).



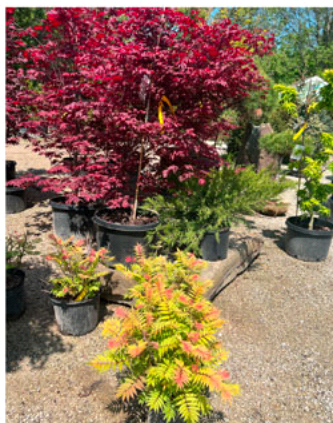
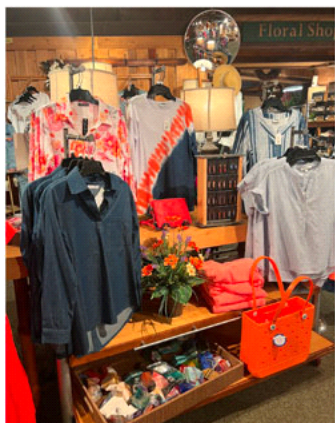
### Breezewood—Chagrin Falls

Need a beautiful plant? How about a hostess gift? What about a cut flower bouquet? Check, check and check. Breezewood Gardens & Gifts offers it all. Much of their business is made up of gift and apparel, annuals and the landscaping division. But the florist shop and trees, shrubs and perennials are contributors to the bottom line, too.

Brother and sister David Kay and Whitney Ickes and their team keep the place in top shape, even amid the chaos of an unexpected frost the morning I visited (down to 29 degrees!). That meant pulling tender annuals inside and then repositioning them once the temps climbed.

They buy in everything they sell, which makes them flexible enough to be able to shop around to find what seems to be trending (at the time of my visit, it was milkweed and lemongrass). On the landscape side, the business continues to grow and encompasses about 25% of the total sales. They offer design-build,

construction and maintenance, often doing large projects like pools and outdoor kitchen installation.



## Classic Floral

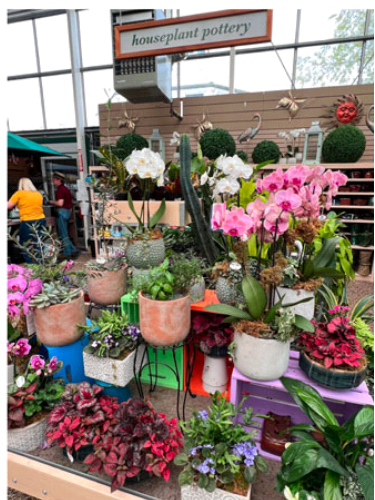
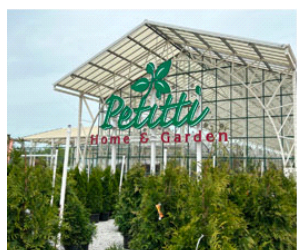
The floral shop has been around from the beginning and you would have thought it would have struggled during the pandemic with mass wedding cancellations. But David said people began sending flowers to their loved ones, and the business became very steady, versus large event orders. Now it's back to wedding business as usual.

## An Eye for Style

The apparel department started about 20 years ago with one western style sweater endcap, David said. Today, it's significantly larger, and they carry everything from shoes to cashmere sweaters, purses, jewelry and more. They've built up a following over the years, and the apparel customer isn't always a greenhouse customer and vice versa. Buying for this section definitely takes an eye for style and an ear for what's trending.

## Long-Lasting Inspo

David tries to catch the customer's eye in the perennial, tree and shrub areas by creating layers of color and texture to inspire buyers. It's less about blocky displays and more about the natural curves of landscape.



## Petitti—Avon

Out of nine stores under the Petitti Garden Center name, this store is one of the largest, if not the largest. It includes 250,000 sq. ft. of retail, most of it under glass with a gorgeous 50-ft. wide by 40-ft. tall, eye-catching structure easily visible from I-90 to drive traffic.

While great weather always helps sales, what helps more are the systems in place to keep product stocked and flowing smoothly, like pre-orders from each of the nine locations to the greenhouse operations at Casa Verde Growers and the Petitti Family of Farms nursery growers. It also helps that they're dialed in closely with

their Epicor POS system to look at 10 years of sales history by SKU to find sales trends for certain weeks. This year's Mother's Day Weekend, stock was patterned after sales data from May 13-15, 2022.

"We can look at the product mix, what sold compared to what's trending this year, look at the ratios and then just make sure we're bringing product in that's balanced," said President AJ Petitti. "You have to massage the numbers and it's not obviously an exact science or forecasting, but you get close."

## Telling a Story

This store is a great example of creating vignettes for hard goods. The gift area spotlights many different styles of gifts and accents before you walk into the Outdoor Living & Plant Market. There's no way to photograph them all, but you get the idea here.

Houseplants, which saw a spike in pre-Mother's Day sales, are displayed on these newer Orlandelli ebb-and-flood tables with capillary mats for easy bottom watering. These help reduce labor in the houseplant department while improving the health of the plants for longer saleability. This picture is doing double duty, showing the tables, as well as the live gift ideas from Mother's Day Weekend.





## Suncrest—Peninsula

There's lots to look at over 8 acres of Suncrest Gardens. This operation started as a landscape company in 1976 (the year I was born!) and morphed into three separate companies today that all fall under the Suncrest Gardens umbrella: Landscape Design, Build & Construction; Management (mowing and maintenance, snow and ice removal); and Garden Center.

Now in his 39th year, Garden Center Director of Operations Rob Cowie is happy to share the company's strategies for success, which include a close eye on the books and inventory management. One strategy that may have helped was to pad the staff earlier than what they normally did.

"We kept a couple of people on through winter that we normally don't, and we started getting ready earlier and we started shipping in our product earlier in hopes that we could start getting it in sequence earlier," Rob said. "We frontloaded the payroll to focus on waiting on



people rather than still putting product away on May 1."

At full staff they have around 150 employees, full and part time, across all three businesses, and at the garden center they buy in most of their product offerings. Their pricing strategy is based on the item, so it's a process.

"We look at every item. We touch and feel every item before we price it," he said. "Everything: bagged goods, giftware, hardgoods, plants."

### Natives Are in

Rob noted that natives are very popular right now with his customers and they come in asking for them specifically. He's also noticed English-style cottage gardens are making a comeback, with customers looking for perennials like lupines and delphinium.

### Neighbors Are Out

Screening plants like arborvitae are still really popular, he said. "People were coming in realizing they were home more and didn't want to look at their neighbor's firewood pile at the back of their barn, that kind of stuff," Rob said. "So we sold tons of screening product."

In this picture I also like the metal container holders that keep them upright. And one more thing to note about trees here—even if it's balled and burlap, it's in a container for easy transport.

### An Eye-Level View

Because of space constraints, they merchandise upward. Rob stacks the pottery himself, and he's an avid auction shopper, where he buys merchandising fixtures at a fraction of the cost.



## Bremec—Chesterland

It'd been a while since I perused the Bremec Garden Center's flagship store in Chesterland, and upon arriving, I remembered just how big it is. At about 40 acres total, the view is expansive and beautiful. You start at the garden center, immediately surrounded by hanging baskets, mixed containers and annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees of all sizes before moving out to the surrounding areas.

Bremecs grows almost everything they sell, buying in just to fill gaps here and there. Marketing Director Billy Herron added they partnered with Monrovia this year on their new garden center program. If a customer requests something that Bremecs doesn't have, it gets

ordered from Monrovia and delivered on the next truckload that swings through.

"They come to us and we get them out of the truck, call the customer and let them know, 'Hey, your plants have arrived,'" Billy said, adding it's a great service to make sure customers have everything they want and have them return to their favorite store—Bremec now has four locations. "They can come pick them up at any garden center they choose."

### A Reputation for Houseplants

A recent addition, said Billy, is the tropicals house, where houseplants, tropicals and succulents of all types reside. It attracts visitors from hours away, something they didn't anticipate, but are happy to oblige.

"We've had people from Erie, Pennsylvania and Ashtabula (Ohio) that travel out here because 'we've heard you have the most indoor plants and the largest variety, so we wanted to check it out,'" he said. "We like making that area a showoff area; we like dazzling it up and just making it a unique place that people enjoy when they come to visit."

### A Sea of Pottery

Pottery is one of the biggest categories for Bremec after the live goods and it's easy to see why. They invest heavily to have the largest selection in Northeast Ohio, and have an entire structure dedicated to pottery and statuary, as well as a color-blocked pottery yard at the front of the property.

### Pond Services

The Pond Shop is for both customers and landscapers—it's a one-stop-shop where both can find everything they need to create water features. But it's more than that. They also offer services to open and close a water feature, as well as maintain it throughout the year. Pictured in front of the pond shop are replicas of the Cleveland Guardians of Traffic, which became famous once again when our baseball team renamed themselves the Guardians. **GP**