

Features

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All-Inclusive Plant Parenting

Jennifer Zurko



The cobblestone-clad Wealthy Street east of downtown Grand Rapids is a pleasant mix of local businesses, modern apartments and historic homes.

Whatever you're looking for, you can pretty much find there. Food to appeal to any palette (there's a bistro called The Electric Cheetah that just screams for you to walk in), boutiques with vintage clothing, an ice cream shop called Pinkie's, coffee shops and breweries.

Pictured: The color scheme of Plant Shop plays off of the '70s vibe from its days as an old Texaco station.

Erin said that mustard yellow and dusty rose colors are very popular with her customers, but she's also seeing bright, bold colors become trendier. She keeps her eye on what colors are showing up in clothing and décor by researching online on sites like Faire, which is a platform that connects vendors and retailers.

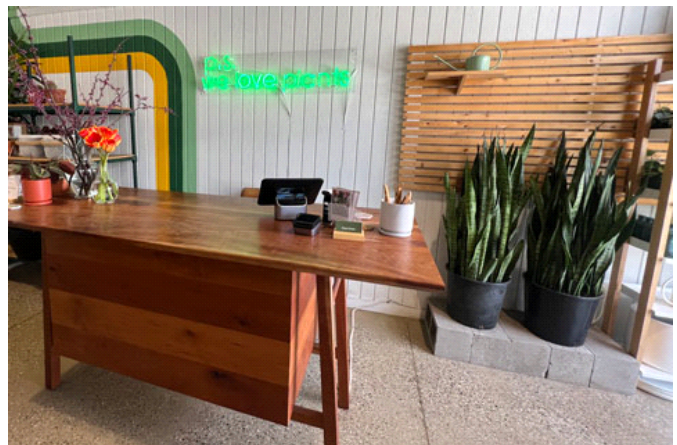
Also, on Wealthy Street is a store that's simply called Plant Shop, which pretty much tells you that it's a shop that sells plants, but it's more than that. Housed in a former Texaco gas station, Plant Shop is one of the newer businesses in the neighborhood. It's a small place, but acts like a big business with all of the services they provide to meet the needs of their customers.

A Plant Shop for Everyone

Erin Rappleye is a native Michigander from the central part of the state, but attended Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids. After graduating in 2012, she worked in retail, first in women's clothing and then at West Elm, a high-end home décor store with locations around the country.

Pictured: Plant Shop's motto: "p.s. we love plants."

After working in retail for a while, she was starting to feel burned out and was trying to figure out what her long-term plan was going to be.



“I had this skill set being able to run a business. Talking to a friend one time, I was like, ‘What I think would be really cool is to open up a plant shop,’” Erin said.

When this same friend opened up a coffee shop, she asked Erin if she was willing to sell houseplants out of the store. Erin said that was her push to go for the idea she’d been kicking around for a while, so she started a little pop-up plant section and called it Plant Shop.

At first, it was a small endeavor—she was still working full time at West Elm. But then one day, she came across the old Texaco building on Wealthy Street.

“When I came across the building, it just clicked like, ‘Plant Shop has to be in this space,’” she said. “I would drive by every day and got to the point where I was like, ‘If I have to drive by this every day and see a different business in there, I’m going to be really sad.’ I thought if I could get the lease, I’ll just try it. So I ended up signing a lease and quit my job.”



Pictured: Plant Shop is housed in a former Texaco gas station, so on nice days, Erin can open up the “garage door” and let in some fresh air. Photo by Jill DeVries.

Plant Shop is housed in a former Texaco gas station, so on nice days, Erin can open up the “garage door” and let in some fresh air. Plant Shop now officially had its own brick-and-mortar space, opening its doors in May 2019. Erin’s primary goal with Plant Shop was to have a place for everybody in every type of housing with every type of plant knowledge—an inclusive place to become a plant parent.

The Plant Hobby Started Early

After college, Erin and a friend moved into a big, beautiful apartment with lots of windows. The small amount of discretionary income they had as recent graduates didn’t allow for a lot of furniture, but it allowed for plants, so they “slowly built up a jungle,” she said. They did everything they could to learn the nuances of different houseplant varieties and their care.

It had been a quite a hobby for her for about five or six years before Plant Shop even existed. But she remembered some of the struggles she had as an urban houseplant caretaker (like having to store large bags of soil in her linen closet or driving three hours to Chicago to get the plants she wanted), so Erin wanted to provide a space that helped to meet all of the needs that she struggled with.

“A lot of what we carry is just really easy and low-maintenance, especially in the neighborhood that I’m in,” Erin said. “In the Historical District, most of the houses are cut up into five or six different apartments, so there’s a lot of low-light living. So we offer a lot of low-light stuff, but also try to hit the favorites and bring in some variety with stuff that’s maybe not super low-maintenance, but really interesting.”

And her customer base is very diverse. The area of Grand Rapids where Plant Shop is located is an inclusive place—representing all races, genders and income levels—so it makes sense that Erin found a home for her business there, especially when inclusivity was her main goal.

“We get a lot of college students, in their early 20s, buying their first plant. They come in once a month and get one small plant to build up their collection,” said Erin. “We have young professionals moving into homes they just purchased and they come in for a few larger things with planters. And we get a lot of referrals from West Elm, so we get a lot of people who get their pots there and then they refer them to us. It’s really a large mix of who’s coming into the shop.”

Pictured: Plant Shop was barely a year old when the pandemic made the world skid to a halt, but being small enough to pivot worked in Erin’s favor. A couple of Instagram sales gave her business a huge boost, and earned them enough to pay the rent and get through it. • Plant Shop offers customers three different types of soil that they can measure, bag and buy, taking as much or as little as they need.

As for the next step, Plant Shop is only a few years old, so it felt weird to ask Erin about her future plans. But she’s young and the flexibility of having a small business does allow her to make some long-term plans.

“Once things are good for a while, I’m like, ‘Okay, what’s next?’” she said. “I would like to open a second location at some point, but things at the shop right now have been really busy, and I want to make sure that I lock in the processes and procedures. Basically, I want it to be self-sustaining so that I could be out of the store focusing on something else. I would love to have a second location in Detroit and some days I think that would be so nice. But then I think the idea of it might be better than actually splitting time between two cities. So I don’t know. We’ll see.”

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