

Features

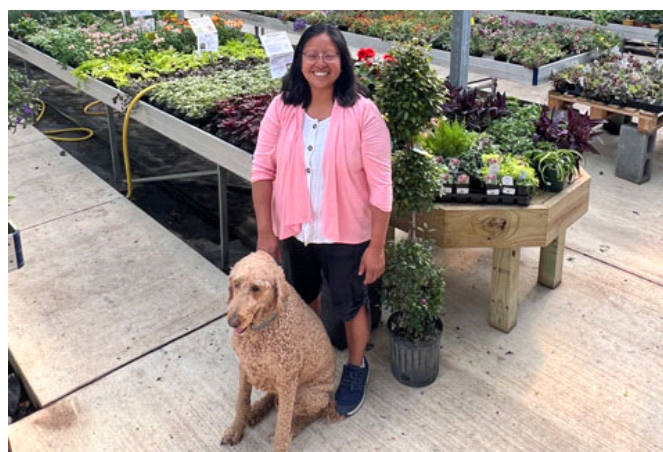
7/1/2024

“It Was Time to Blaze My Own Path”

Jennifer Polanz

If you’ve been a reader for nearly a decade, you might recall Jenell Martin, one of our Young Retailer Award finalists in 2015 (she was in the group with Ryan Watkins and Valerie Nalls).

At the time, she was the manager at Catalpa Grove Farm in Columbiana, Ohio, a produce market and garden center owned by Craig and Joanne Mercer. Today, she’s the proud owner of Jenne’s Garden Center in Myerstown, Pennsylvania, where she grew up. It wasn’t easy, but building and running her own garden center has been a rewarding experience for her and she has big plans for the future.



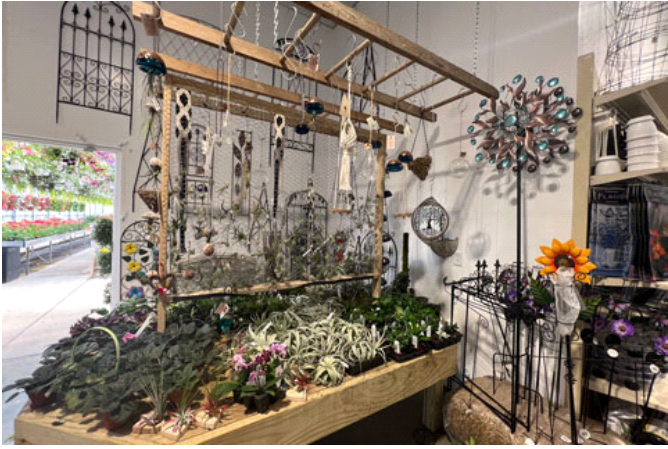
This spring, I made the winding trek out from Cleveland through the rolling hills of eastern Pennsylvania to visit and chat about what it took to get here and what lies ahead.

Pictured: Owner Jenell Martin with her 8-year-old golden doodle, Jackson, in her 1-year-old retail operation, Jenne’s Garden Center.

Making the Decision

After working at Catalpa Grove Farm for 18 years, it was time for a change. She wasn’t sure where she fit with the future of the

business and she was getting restless. Plus, her niece, Nolzia, was born in 2019 back in Myerstown—where most of her family still lived—and she wanted to be an active and involved aunt.



“When she was born, there was the pull to watch her grow up, and I just couldn’t see myself going back and working for someone,” Jenell said. “And, obviously, entrepreneurship runs in the family.”

Pictured: Just one section of houseplants in the main store—the wire structure shows off tillandsia and the wooden ladders highlight macrame, hanging baskets, containers and “jellyfish” tillandsia planters.

It certainly does. In 2021 her father sold her the L-shaped property the garden center sits on now, as it was his father’s before him. The store sits on a hill

overlooking a busy two-lane road that winds into nearby Lebanon, about 15 minutes away. Below the hillside garden center is the shed business that her father runs with a nephew, and across the street her uncle’s farm stretches for acres. Another uncle owned a farmers market until it sold and her sister still lives on the farmland they grew up on down the street from the garden center.

But while the decision to return home wasn’t difficult, the actual building process was quite the opposite. Jenell was very familiar with the greenhouse-building process in Ohio, as she was at Catalpa for multiple expansions. The process in Pennsylvania is vastly different, though, with lots of red tape, extra costs and zoning requirements. Part of the requirements included moving the store from where the original plans had it, excavating out part of the hillside and leveling the land—all at an unexpected expense.

“I’m glad I didn’t know all the red tape because I don’t know if I would have went for it,” she admitted. “It was that extensive. Now that I’m on this side of it, yes, we made it through and we’re built.

“That’s probably going to give me a little bit of pause before I put up another greenhouse or add on because of all the permitting.”

A Year In

She opened April 1, 2023 after permitting and natural gas hookup delays pushed the opening from its original plan of early March. She missed those sales, which she realized after having a banner March this year, and found out that her town’s season starts earlier than back in Ohio. She also had to adjust to a different customer base who’re looking for a different mix of products. Her product adjustments and marketing efforts worked this year—they finished May strong and were up significantly over last year’s sales.



Pictured: The gorgeous view from the back of the retail sales area at Jenne’s.

“I bulked up on perennials this year; it seemed like no customer left this door without a perennial last year and that was definitely different than Catalpa,” she said, adding her No. 1 category last year was perennials. “There [at Catalpa] it was annuals, but perennials stayed strong here throughout the summer into the fall.”

Flowering shrubs and trees were also excellent sellers, along with houseplants, which saw higher demand in Myerstown than at Catalpa.

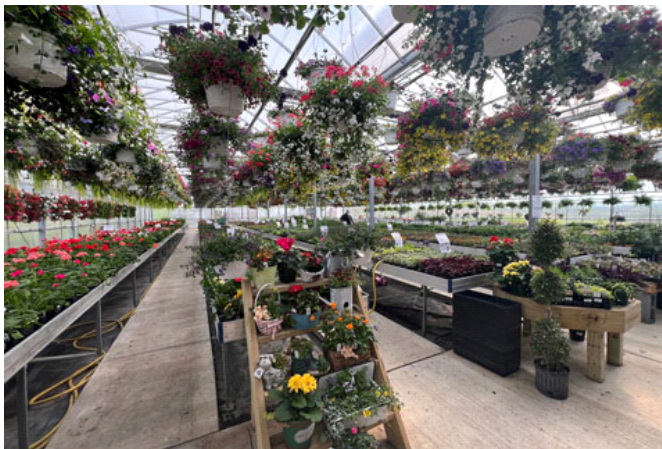
"I was unprepared, but now I feel like I'm ready and it's a category we're just starting to see," Jenell noted about the houseplant department. "I tried houseplants at Catalpa and it wasn't a category that was a killer. But here houseplants got me through the winter."

A couple other key areas she noticed are the continued popularity of native plants ("I probably couldn't have sold Joe Pye Weed for trying 10 years ago, but this year they are big"), a mix of houseplant accessories and decorative pots, and a mix of functional and decorative garden accents like rain gauges.

She also learned early on to listen to her younger employees on certain product buys, like glass misters for indoor plants and whimsical houseplant pots.

"I let them get into the houseplant pot buying and they chose stuff I probably wouldn't have. They're very trendy," she said. "That definitely helped to let the older teenagers and early 20s do some of the buying."

"I took care of the tried-and-true products, and I let them bring in the trendier, younger ones."



Pictured: When I visited it was right before the weather broke and spring buying began.

Drilling down further, on the perennials side, she doubled her crop of lavender and could tell when we chatted that they'll probably still run out, while scented favorites like lemongrass, lemon balm and citronella continue to be popular. Eucalyptus is another hot item, as are any plants that make good cut flowers.

"Everyone wants to raise their own cut flowers. Like, everyone," she said. "Anyone with a little piece of ground is putting in stuff for cut flowers."

Managing vs. Owning

I asked her now that she's starting her second year as the owner, what's the difference between being a manager and being an owner. Turns out, a lot.

"If you would have asked me before I was an owner, I probably would have said I have a pretty good idea what it's going to be like to be an owner. I didn't. I didn't," Jenell emphasized, but added it's not all negative. "There's just nothing as rewarding and nothing quite as stressful. And because it's so stressful, it makes the good days the most rewarding."

"It's a whole different option when you're holding all the cards. When you know, if you fail ... It's a whole different option when you can just punch the clock and go pick up somewhere else and get another job."

What's made it a bit easier is staying in contact with Craig and Joanne, who she talks to nearly every day. They've been able to give her advice to help navigate the launch and potential rough waters of the first year in business. She also credits the industry as a whole and her supplier partners, many of whom allowed her to keep her regional sales rep despite moving out of the region.

"It was great because I didn't have to try to work with someone new," she said, adding that familiarity was key while getting started. "That's one thing I will say about this industry is it is one of these industries that back you."

That's allowed her to hit the ground, growing her own annuals and most of her herbaceous perennials, while buying in shrubs, trees, houseplants and ferns.

Planning for the Future

Shopping at Jenne's Garden Center is already an experience, with beautiful views of the rolling hillside from the back of the retail area. But even more experience is on the agenda for the future.

"I definitely want to have more of an outside area where people can come and hang out—that's definitely my top priority," Jenell said. "I want it where people can linger and enjoy the outdoors, whether that's a pergola, fireplace, benches."

Last fall, she tested that with fall activities like a corn maze, a campfire to roast s'mores, a petting zoo, sunflower patch and more, and it attracted families and Millennial shoppers alike. It's a tricky area to drive customer traffic, so events and experiences can help with that.

She also plans to have more workshops and community activities. Her most popular so far was a partnership with a friend who has a catering business and they offered a charcuterie board workshop for Valentine's Day, along with a succulent planting workshop. Another successful event involved partnering with the local school district that offered faculty "points" if they do wellness activities, like a planting workshop at Jenne's. One more partnership with local schools had businesses around town (including Jenne's) hang up poems written by school children. The kids—shuttled by their parents, of course—go to each of the businesses and read the poems for a chance to win a gift card.

Her sights are also set on building an online presence. With her Square point-of-sale, it's easy to incorporate e-commerce into the website. Currently, it's set up for online purchase and in-store pickup, and only hardgoods and accents are available, as well as gift cards.

I also asked about work-life balance, to which she asked, "For my employees or for me?" Most of her employees are part-time and are in the Gen Z age-range, which means they're keenly aware of that balance.

"I am trying to let them have their lives without being too intense," she noted.

As for her work-life balance? "I just want to try to make this successful. The goal is to eventually have one!" **GP**