

Cover Story

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Creating a Community for Container Designers

Jennifer Polanz

Several months ago, Digging In Association Founder and Executive Director Andrea Gasper reached out to tell me about the organization she started and how much it had grown. It's specifically for container gardening professionals, a segment of our industry that beautifies our communities, but don't always get a lot of recognition for their work. Today, that organization boasts more than 200 members in the U.S. and Canada and continues to grow. Andrea had the pleasure of telling the group in August at the annual event that the group had been approved as an official non-profit association.

"This change to a non-profit professional association is a huge step forward for our industry," she told me. "This designation shows that we are committed to fostering collaboration, expanding knowledge and strengthening our collective impact, allowing us to drive meaningful change in our line of work. We are excited about the expanded possibilities this brings to our members and the acknowledgment of container gardening as a profession."

Andrea got me in touch with three members of the now-association to learn more about them. Here you'll read the stories of those three members, how they started their businesses and what the organization has done for them. See the sidebar for how you can join, too.

Joining Digging In Association

Digging In Association announced its formal formation and designation as a 501 c6 tax-exempt organization this summer, which marks a significant milestone for its more than 200 members in the U.S. and Canada. The association's goal is to leverage new opportunities for growth and support, and enhance its ability to offer valuable services, meaningful connections, resources and advocacy.

You can find out more about the organization and join at Digging-In.org or by contacting Andrea Gasper at hello@digging-in.org.



Howard Nemeroff, Plant Parenting, Chicago

Howard Nemeroff's path wasn't a straight one. He'd been looking for a copywriting job out of college, but it didn't quite work that way.

"I found myself with an interior landscaping company because I knew plants and needed to pay the bills until I could find something," he said, adding they weren't exactly looking for someone to service the plants. "As they were looking for a truck driver, I convinced them I could read a map—this was before cell phones—and was hired in as a truck driver."

After changing job titles within that company, he decided to strike out on his own to create a plant doctoring business. I asked what that entailed.

"If somebody had a sick plant or wanted a design idea, I would be that person, be it repotting a plant or taking care of a plant that had some kind of insect issue," he described. "People started asking me to do containers and I started doing that. Creatively that was much more attractive to me, and I started doing more and more of that."

He officially started his business in 1986, which also incorporated plant sales and a service business. Today, it's evolved into both interiorscaping and containers, with some clients partaking in both services.

He said being situated in Chicago, he has the benefit of industry awareness as then-Mayor Richard Daley and his wife, Maggie, were on a mission to beautify the city—to the point where for outdoor sidewalk dining there was a calculated square footage ratio of flowers to asphalt, among other landscape requirements. Another benefit is the proximity to a variety of excellent growers and suppliers.

Planting in the city is different than planting in the suburbs, though. On the challenges side, planting up containers in high rises means you can't even get into the building without a certificate of insurance and parking is an issue. Plants and tools may need to be dropped off at the building and parking secured maybe a couple of blocks away.

Because the city is always a few degrees warmer than the surrounding suburbs, Howard has been using greenhouse hydrangeas in spring arrangements for a long time, which can be done in the city thanks to the slightly warmer temps.

"If I plant 300 hydrangeas in the course of the spring, I might replace 15 or 20 due to cold weather," he noted. "But the city, with all the concrete, is always a few degrees warmer than the suburbs. I plant the city first, and as the calendar progresses, we move away from the city."

He begins the fall campaign in the middle of September, and starts Christmas as early as mid-November to accommodate the tree lighting and Michigan Avenue parade. Customers want their product a good six weeks before the holiday. That's when he pulls out the Noble and Silver fir, the only two he uses for cut greens, as well as preserved eucalyptus, natural pinecones and other Earthy accents. He's always tweaking the look, though.

"I'm always looking for something a little bit different that sets me apart," he added.

His business has grown through the years via some advertising and now word of mouth (and Instagram).

"For me it's flower envy, it's the neighbor seeing my work and they want some, too," Howard said. "At this point, I've got a full book."

Howard joined Digging In early on, and has appreciated the seminars and the education he's found through the organization. He's also happy to help others, as he's learned a lot in his nearly 40-year career.

"I appreciate the community and talking with people about their problems," he said. "It's nice that I've done this long enough that I might have a solution to what their hardship is, if I can take on a teaching role."

Quick Tips: Howard's Faves

He's recently taken to creating containers inspired by pavé jewelry settings, which is short and tight. Plant favorites include:

Begonias of all kinds

Decorative grasses

Andromeda

Florist hydrangeas

Cabbages and kale for fall

Tropicals for impact and leaf color



Cindy Funes, Garden Revelry, Seattle, Washington

Designing containers now for 16 years, Cindy Funes, owner of Garden Revelry, wasn't always in this industry. "Like most container gardeners, and probably many in our industry, it was not a straight path," she said of her horticulture journey. "I came from a sales background in the wine industry."

That job took her on the road, and after getting married and starting a family she wanted something that would allow her to be closer to home that blended her two passions—graphic design and horticulture.

"And so I took a couple courses just at the local community college in both, and I fell hook, line and

sinker into horticulture," she added.

She began working with the Northwest Flower Show in a liaison role working with display garden creators, which led to working with another well-known local container designer, Tina Dixon, as a member of her crew. Cindy eventually began her own company, first called Urban Botanicals, which morphed into Garden Revelry as she began hiring crew members to keep up with demand. Here she talks about why container gardening was such a draw for her:

"There were a couple of things I loved about it—that you could transform a space and create beauty for people instantly. You weren't planting in a landscape waiting for the plants to grow and fill in. You were creating these arrangements that had impact right away and that was super satisfying for me.

"And then the fact that you could play and experiment with things; it wasn't a huge investment. For instance, maybe there was this unique, I don't know, plant or evergreen, that would be expensive to purchase in a large size, such as a 10-gal. and put in the landscape. But I could put a 3-gal., maybe even a 5-gal., into a container and have it there for several years and then move it to the landscape. It was a less expensive way to get some really interesting plants

that the client could enjoy.”

She also enjoys customizing the containers based on her clients’ visions and changing the mood to echo the seasons. Her offerings are design, install and maintenance, and she noted maintenance isn’t an option, it’s required. The reasons are twofold: it allows for more stability with keeping employees and it allows Cindy control over how the plantings look year-round for the best results for her clients.

Being in the Pacific Northwest, she also has the benefit of a fairly mild climate that mimics a Mediterranean environment. That means a wide variety of plant options, including many that can overwinter to create larger specimens.

Perhaps it’s that variety that’s played a role in container gardening becoming more popular. Or at least it’s one factor, along with time and upkeep for customers of all ages.

“We have this aging group of gardeners and their interest in container gardens has increased because they want something more manageable. And container gardening is more manageable than that huge garden,” Cindy noted. “And then the younger people are also wanting container gardens because they’re living in smaller spaces and containers work really well for that. But, also, it’s a great way if you’re not a savvy gardener to experiment with new skills before attacking the big garden. So we’ve got both ends of the spectrum interested in container gardening.”

A growing business like Cindy’s can be challenging and joining the Digging In group, now Association, gave her a community in which she could bounce ideas off others, find new vendors and gain business insight, like vehicle fleet management, for instance. It also gave her insight as to what others are talking about around the country versus just in her region.

“It has helped to broaden my world and enabled me to have more educational and knowledgeable conversations with clients,” she said. “It’s expanded my plant palette and my business.”

Quick Hits: Cindy’s Favorites

Aeoniums for texture and shiny foliage

Cannas and hibiscus for a tropical flair

Vaccinium ovatum, native huckleberry for structure with berries and blooms

Impatiens, geraniums and pansies as workhorses

Cuphea and salvias for color and pollinators

Heucheras and hellebores for year-round interest



Ronda Roemmelt Sneider, Season to Season Horticultural Services, Annapolis, Maryland

Ronda Roemmelt Sneider's trajectory in horticulture started at Penn State University as a student going through the veterinary program. She, however, hit the brick wall of organic chemistry and pivoted, thanks to all her ag credits, to horticulture.

"I tell that story tongue-in-cheek because I kind of fell into horticulture, but it's ended up being really the best thing. I couldn't imagine it any other way," she said. "I really love what I do."

After graduating she worked at a couple of garden centers, including Homestead Gardens—where she planted up container mixes—and a landscape company for a while until she and her then-husband, a landscape architect, bought property and started a high-end design

build residential landscape company. While there, she did the container plantings, and even after the divorce when she left the company she continued to do containers for clients who requested her specifically.

Later, she went back to the landscape company on the nursery side to sell trees, which was great for her, but she was also looking to start a business of her own. She began Season to Season Horticultural Services in 2019 with another professional, but they moved in different directions in 2022. Since then, Ronda has been the sole owner and now it's her only endeavor thanks to the growing number of clients she has and the demand for her services.

"We provide year-round container gardening services—we call it a subscription service," Ronda said, explaining that people generally sign up for two to four rotations a year. "Some people have us come more frequently than that, but generally that's the most (common). Some of our customers have multiple homes, so we're doing their house here in Annapolis and their home at the beach. We do their home in Washington, D.C. and their weekend home in Annapolis.

"What we really specialize in is absolutely unique, creative, stop-you-in-your tracks, beautiful arrangements."

She and her crews now have a studio and office space, as well as a greenhouse to be able to store material as needed, which gives her the ability to source and hold products. Initially, they had other services as well, like estate and vegetable garden design, install and maintenance, but that's since been reduced in favor of containers.

"It turns out that you can have a business that's just container gardening and not have to worry about the other stuff. So we really have gotten away from just about everything—we're mainly container gardening," Ronda said, adding they offer interior container design, too. "And we do quite a bit of holiday, which is an extension of container gardening because we do rotate a lot of pots for Christmas. We also do wreaths and table centerpieces and garlands and things like that."

She also enjoys being a part of the homeowner's overall design, and being pulled into the planning mix early on with landscape and interior designers.

"Sometimes we're supplying containers for customers, but a lot of times we're working with a landscape architect or with an interior designer to help them source containers for their clients," she said. "And it's fun to be part of that

process so early on and get to see what goes on inside the mind of a designer.

“I love to go into all of their offices and see the beautiful fabric swatches and the wallpaper books spread out all over the place, and the tile swatches and the granite swatches, all these different things. And then to know that we’re in some small way contributing to that final luxury, finished product.”

When it comes to Digging In, Ronda said the organization has been so great because it’s such a mix of small companies to large with lots of perspectives. She’s even spoken to the group about her commercial work in D.C., and downtown Annapolis and its tricky nature.

“We have real tight streets. We have parking issues and a lot of times we’re going through buildings having to go to rooftops or terraces or courtyards or things like that,” she added. “So there’s a lot of logistics that go along with that.”

Quick Hits: Ronda's Faves

Bromeliad

Plectranthus Troy’s Gold (and Guacamole)

Scabiosa

Salvia Rockin’ Blue Suede Shoes (and Black and Blue)

Evolvulus

Yellow lantana

Yellow calibrachoa