

Features

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A Labor of Love

David Williams



On my most recent visit to Bucks Country Gardens in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, I found myself pausing just inside the front doors, taking in the scene with fresh eyes. This wasn't my first time here, but something about the space compelled me to linger: The store was impeccably clean, the floors gleaming, and the aisles wide and inviting. Every plant, pot and piece of décor seemed thoughtfully placed, as if arranged by a curator who understood that gardening isn't just about growth—it's about story, style and the simple pleasure of feeling at ease in a space where nature and design meet.

This time, as I stepped forward, another detail caught my attention. Near the information area, there was a

striking wall displaying photographs of the owners and staff. Each frame captured the faces behind the operation—the people who choose which annuals to stock, who arrange the containers, who help customers envision their dream landscapes. Standing there, admiring the smiling faces, I realized this subtle, yet powerful, introduction was telling me: "We're a community first, a business second."

In a world where garden centers can sometimes feel like transactional spaces, Bucks Country Gardens exudes warmth and authenticity. The team's pride in their work, from impeccably merchandised displays to friendly expertise, radiated through every aspect of the experience.

An Evolving Story

I had the chance to interview Tom Hebel, who took the helm at Bucks Country Gardens in 1993. Originally founded as Royer Nurseries in 1961, the business began as a modest wholesale nursery and landscape company. Tom joined in 1981 as a landscape designer, and from the start, the founder recognized his potential by offering him future ownership. Under Tom's leadership, the company evolved into a premier lifestyle garden center: a place where customers could find not only high-quality plants, but also services like landscape design and construction, as well as carefully chosen garden furniture and décor.

I first visited Bucks Country Gardens more than a decade ago during a Garden Centers of America tour and was immediately impressed by the thoughtful displays and merchandising—so much more polished than many older establishments that clung to tradition. Even then, it felt forward-thinking. Now, returning after all these years, I find

that energy not just preserved, but enhanced. With deeper family involvement and a sustained openness to fresh ideas, the operation feels even more dynamic than before.

Tom's sons, Gregory and Ryan, each found their way into the business on their own terms. Gregory, who holds a degree in landscape contracting from Penn State, joined the landscape division early on—over 20 years ago—and has shaped countless outdoor spaces that reflect both professional artistry and horticultural mastery. Ryan's path was less direct. After stints in the automotive and agricultural industries (including working at John Deere), he eventually returned to the family fold, bringing a unique perspective and skill set back with him. Today, the brothers' complementary talents keep Bucks Country Gardens responsive to market trends, while honoring the center's long-standing focus on quality and service.



As Tom and I spoke, he emphasized the complexities of running a multi-generational family business.

“When we began the transition, we assumed only one son would take over,” he explained. “But then the younger one showed interest and suddenly the planning became more intricate.”

To navigate this evolution smoothly, the Hebels enlisted the help of a family business consultant. Jared Byas of Common Good Advisors isn't a horticultural specialist—he's an expert at understanding family dynamics within a business.

“His role is to separate the family dynamic from the business dynamic,” Tom said. “It's critical to have that guidance.”

This willingness to seek outside counsel mirrors what we strive for in our gardens: balance, perspective and honest assessment. Just as a gardener might call upon an arborist or soil specialist, the Hebels recognized that preserving the family's harmony and setting up a long-term plan for success required a specialist in the human aspect of business.

The importance of planning is evident in everything Bucks Country Gardens does. Tom and his wife crafted a five-year plan for transferring ownership to their sons. By the end of this period, Gregory and Ryan will fully own the business, while Tom and his wife step gracefully back. This clarity ensures that the future leaders have room to grow and innovate, just as a well-spaced planting design ensures that perennials have room to flourish.

Dedication to the Numbers

Another crucial element supporting Bucks Country Gardens' success is their unwavering attention to the numbers. After all, passion must be paired with profitability for any retail operation to sustain itself. Tom and his team diligently track sales, margins and inventory turns. This focus on metrics is as much a part of their culture as choosing the right plant varieties for their customers. They understand that monitoring finances closely allows them to pivot quickly and maintain stability, even in challenging conditions.

And challenging conditions did arise in 2024. The region's spring weather was notoriously tough—sudden cold snaps, heavy rains and unpredictable patterns that tested both crops and consumer confidence. While some garden centers struggled with fluctuating foot traffic and hesitant buyers, Bucks Country Gardens managed to stay

on course.

“Despite the challenging spring, we’re set to finish 2024 with sales numbers close to what we had in 2023,” Tom noted.

Clear-sighted planning, a willingness to adapt and that unwavering commitment to reading the numbers as closely as the weather forecast all play a role in keeping the business profitable and secure.

Continuing the Evolution

Looking to the horizon, the Hebels are branching out in exciting new ways. In April 2025, they’ll open a gift boutique at The Square in Dublin Town Center, about seven miles away. This new venture won’t be another full-scale garden center; rather, it’s a carefully curated retail environment focusing on gifts, décor and a hint of horticultural flair—just enough to evoke the Bucks Country Gardens signature.

“We think of it as fine-tuning the boutique offering we already have here,” Tom explained. “We’re building on what we know, using our existing supply chains and resources, and placing the right person in charge.”

Staffing, as Tom mentioned, was crucial to the decision. The family had a trusted employee ready to take on leadership at the new location. This key piece fell into place, making it a low-risk extension of their brand.

When asked about inspiration and new ideas, Tom pointed to his involvement with the GAP Group, a network of garden centers that was initially formed with help from industry consultant Ian Baldwin. This collaboration is like a cross-pollination of ideas, allowing garden centers to share successes, failures and creative concepts.

“We communicate regularly,” Tom said. “We have a platform where we’re bouncing ideas around almost daily. It’s invaluable—someone tries a new merchandising approach or workshop format, and we all learn from it.”

This commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation is what keeps Bucks Country Gardens fresh. The store’s immaculate merchandising, the personal introduction of the staff photos and the consistent standard of quality didn’t arise by accident. It’s the result of a team—and a family—dedicated to refining their craft. They know that gardening is never static. Plants grow, change, bloom and fade, and so do businesses. To remain vibrant, a garden center must respond to shifting conditions, whether that’s a new generation taking the reins, a changing market, or simply the desire to offer something meaningful and new to the community.

Walking past that wall of photographs near the information area, I felt a sense of continuity and care. It’s not just that the store is clean or the displays are carefully arranged—though those details matter immensely. It’s that these elements are part of a larger tapestry of values: pride in the past, faith in the future and a heartfelt commitment to growing something beautiful, together. **GP**