

Cover Story

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South Street Gardens' Design-Forward Debut

Dave Williams



On October 4, South Street Gardens cut a wide, black ribbon, a nod to the brand's signature black palette, and invited local residents, friends, family and officials inside to see what a determined family can build in a single year. What began as a practical idea to support a thriving landscape company has become a design-forward destination. Walk the site today and you move through four connected spaces that define the experience: Home, Florist, Events, and Nursery & Garden Center. Each part strengthens the others to create an unexpected experience.

The flower shop entrance.



When I arrived to conduct the interview, a first-time guest crossed my path while I was walking through the sales yard. She didn't know why I was there, but said, "This place is beautiful, I've never seen anything like it." That unscripted line captures what I kept hearing as people were discovering the space for the first time.

"We wanted to build a place that inspires," said Matt Bruin. "Not just a spot to grab fertilizer, but somewhere you slow down, explore and leave with ideas."

They transformed an old hoophouse into an upscale

retail space.

That desire sits beneath every decision the Bruin family has made as they transformed a former florist property into a layered retail experience.

From Landscape Roots to Retail Heartbeat

The Bruins came to retail through Bruin & Sons, their landscape and construction company. For years they pictured a space where design conversations could happen face to face and planting orders could be supported by on-site inventory. The original plan was simple: use the property to complement the landscape work. The reality grew larger as walls came down and new paths emerged.

“As we built, pieces began to click,” Matt said. “What started as a nursery became a florist, then home, then workshops and events. Each part made the others stronger.”

The goal was never to copy the classic model of a single shed and a row of hoses; the family wanted a place where people wander, discover and feel welcomed to linger.

The Bruin family. | The future event space.



Many Hands, One Vision

South Street Gardens is a true family build. At the center is Mike Bruin, the builder and steady metronome who keeps everything on track. Barbara puts it plainly. If it weren't for her husband's dedication, this would not be happening for their family. In nearly two years he hasn't skipped a beat, missing only two days—one for his son's wedding and one for another son's engagement party.

Barbara Bruin, the family's matriarch, steers finance and keeps the whole operation on course. Her sons Matt, Michael Jr., Ryan and Robert carry the day-to-day. Matt leads operations and the push that keeps the floor fresh. Camren, who finished floral school and married Michael Jr. in May 2025, runs the flower shop and has grown demand at a remarkable pace. Thais Karol, Ryan's fiancée, leads the home store and coordinates events. Michael Jr., Ryan and Robert rotate through the backbone work of projects, receiving, builds and display resets, stepping in wherever the day demands. Grandma Mary Ann arrives with baked goods and morale at just the right moment.

The culture is collaborative and quick on its feet. Merchandising is a team sport. Buyers gather to place orders together, comparing favorites and price points so the assortment serves many budgets. The family is formalizing a regular meeting rhythm that feels more like a board meeting than a kitchen table debate.

Design Forward, Quick Execution

Speed is one of the signatures here. In the family's telling, big shifts sometimes happen overnight. A wall that reduced retail square footage and blocked sightlines disappeared between Erik and my suggestion and the next morning. This past week, a thin brick face turned a plain wall into a visual anchor. One favorite change involved a

tired hoophouse now completely re-imagined (more on that below).

The choice to go with a unified dark exterior on all buildings challenged expectations of those who heard about it, then won people over once the buildings were painted, dressed and planted. The look sets a tone that feels modern, warm and intentional, a dark backdrop that makes any flowers and merchandise pop. Guests notice.

“That first walk-in moment matters here,” Barbara said. “People say, ‘I had no idea a garden center could look like this.’”

Groundwork that Guides the Eye

Underfoot, the hardscape ties the campus together. Patterned paving, clean joints and smart grade transitions make movement intuitive. The on-site paving work frames vignettes, points guests toward the next discovery and quietly proves a contractor’s eye for drainage and durability.

The old hoophouse was once a vestige of the florist that was here before. Perhaps they grew flowers to cut. Today it invites you to slow down. Many garden centers inherit old hoophouses and assume they belong on the scrap pile. Mike took a rusty, twisted structure and turned it into an upscale retail space, adding wooden boxed-in beams and a corrugated steel separation wall. He replaced the gravel underfoot with Cambridge pavers that finished the space. It now reads like an upscale sales space, with benches and materials chosen to elevate the plants rather than compete with them. Circulation was simplified to remove dead ends, with presentation benches at comfortable heights for easy browsing. The palette inside is quiet on purpose. Neutral floors and benches let foliage and flower color do the talking.

Choosing Help & Learning Fast

Opening a first-year garden center is a maze of decisions. That’s why the Bruin family brought in Erik and me, garden center consultants, early. Outside perspective matters most alongside decisive action. We provided an opening framework, a vendor short list, clear notes on layout and circulation, and guidance on pricing. The Bruins executed within hours. By the next morning, the wall that reduced retail square footage was gone and that momentum continued through benches, counters, pathways, receiving and early pricing choices. The space now presents with the poise of a long-standing favorite.

Vendor discovery began with recommendations from our first multi-day visit, then widened through reps, local growers, trade contacts, social research and trial orders. Erik and I helped review opening spring orders to tweak the merchandise mix and give the team a strong foundation of products.

Because they were a new business without sales history, we also advised them on how to begin negotiating terms with vendors. The family invited suppliers to the site whenever possible. Seeing the space flipped switches for many reps and led to better terms. Quality quickly became the non-negotiable. A few growers and hardgoods partners distinguished themselves with consistent material and patient support for a new retailer. The team kept careful notes and built a living playbook for next season.

Starting the Story Early

On our first visit we advised the team to begin social media well before opening, to build anticipation and give Morristown a reason to watch the project grow. Matt stepped up and made it a daily practice. He mixed plants, pets, design vignettes and his dry wit that leans into a punishing amount of puns (think “philoden-done right,” “fern-tastic finds” and “thyme well spent”). In 10 months he’s grown their Instagram audience to almost 7,000 followers, and you can feel that community translate into visits and word of mouth.

In August, Gap Group East, a cohort of garden centers that have been successful for decades, toured the property. The line that stuck with me was simple: "South Street Gardens' level of merchandising is extremely high, especially considering how new they are to the business." From decades-strong garden center owners, that is praise that matters.

The Partner Pivot that Changed the Arc

The journey wasn't straightforward. An early partnership didn't align with the family's passion or pace and nearly stalled the project.

"You have to choose partners who want to be here for the same reasons," Matt said. "If they are not energized by the day-to-day, it shows."

The new partner, David Vorcheimer, brings hospitality and event experience from running 1776, a restaurant in Morristown. He saw opportunities the family hadn't prioritized yet and helped accelerate practical steps, from guest flow details to packaging and simple equipment decisions that make busy weekends easier.

His hospitality lens also clarified the roadmap for private events. The site was already hosting classes and community moments. With a partner who lives in reservations, private dining and special events, the team began to translate that energy into a plan.

What's Next

The most asked question in town is about the café. The Bruins expect to move that plan forward in the near future. A cup of coffee changes the rhythm of a visit. A café inside a greenhouse gives people a reason to come in January as well as July. It creates a comfortable anchor for workshops and small gatherings, and turns a shopping trip into a place to meet a friend.

A full event space is also on the way. Demand is already strong, with steady inquiries for private gatherings in a setting that feels green, warm and central. The team is shaping a program that fits the property and serves the neighborhood, from intimate celebrations to community nights. Artful moments will be part of the experience through curated displays and collaborations, keeping the visual story fresh without adding complexity. The Bruins have accomplished an amazing feat in a short amount of time. I look forward to watching them grow into truly a destination as the years go on.

"We built a place where people feel welcome," Matt said. "Come for a plant, a class, a bouquet or a coffee when that opens. Stay because it feels good to be here. That is the point." **GP**

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