

Features

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The Greenhouse That Was Almost Condos

David Williams



La Serra Gardens sits in Totowa, New Jersey, on a small piece of land in one of the busiest parts of North Jersey. Today, people wander through greenhouses with coffee in hand, listen to music, shop for plants, gifts, linens and pottery, and maybe leave with a homemade pignoli cookie. But when Lisamarie Suriano first knew the property, it was simply a local greenhouse she visited as a customer.

At the time, she was still in the restaurant world in Montclair, New Jersey, where she

worked as a baker in the family restaurant. Her mother-in-law lived nearby and Lisamarie would stop at the greenhouse on the way back to work.

“I would bring them a box of fresh raviolis that we had made and they would give me some mint plants,” she told me.

One day, during one of those visits, a man handed an envelope over Lisamarie’s head and told the owner of the property that he needed an answer by Monday. Lisamarie asked what was in the envelope. We all have pivot moments in life, when one question or one decision sends everything in a different direction. For Lisamarie, this was one of those moments.

Several builders wanted the land. They wanted to clear the property, including the 1865 house, and build condos. When she learned what the envelope meant, Lisamarie told the owner that selling to builders was stupid. His response was simple: “Then give me an offer.”

After about an hour, she did. They shook hands. A year and a half later, in 2019, La Serra Gardens began.



Learning by Doing

Lisamarie's garden center experience was from the shopper's side. Loving plants and running a garden center are two very different things. "I got here and I thought I was gonna be a grower," she said. "And I quickly realized that I didn't have that expertise."

Lisamarie Suriano doesn't go to the big gift markets. Instead, she spends hours searching for vendors and products herself. Her buying approach is pretty direct. "Whatever I like," she said. "I feel like I'm just buying for myself."



Lisamarie is candid about those first years. "I definitely would say, with complete confidence, that I screwed up for about the first five years," she said. Much of that came from overbuying. As an artist, she was drawn to color, pattern, texture and beauty. She would see plants or merchandise and want all of it. The hardest lesson was learning how quickly plants need to turn.

Growers and suppliers helped her through those growing pains. Overdevest Nurseries, Lucas Greenhouse, Foliera and others guided her, gave advice, extended trust and helped her understand how to buy.

Creating a Place to Feel at Home

Lisamarie studied fine arts for a time, but the instinct goes back much further. As a child, she remembers making little nooks in her room and hanging stuffed animals over her bed with fishing line. That same instinct shows up throughout La Serra, where she tucks tables into places where people can feel almost alone, even in a shared public space.

When I asked what she wants people to feel when they walk into La Serra, she answered without hesitation. "At home," she said. Coffee, music, cake and a place to sit all become part of that feeling. Lisamarie feels it, too.

"There are many nights that I close up, go up and eat, and find myself back down here in an hour, just sitting in the chair here," she said. Hospice nurses have brought patients. People come not just to shop, but to sit. "I think, as stupid as it sounds, that it's just paying me back for saving it," she said.



A Small Site With Real Limits

La Serra is not a large garden center. The property is roughly an acre and a half, but however the lines are drawn, the working space is tight. The greenhouses, gardens, retail areas, café, event space, parking and receiving all have to fit into a small footprint. Lisamarie has about 10 to 12 parking spaces. Staff park in her driveway next door. Customers park along the street or near the police station and walk over.

Lisamarie estimated the sales mix is roughly 50% plants and 50% gift, home, café and related categories. "This year, houseplants are through the roof," she said.

"I can't make 10 spots into 20 spots," she said.

Deliveries are part of the small-site dance. Vendors know the site is tight, so deliveries may arrive early or late. When extra hands are needed, Lisamarie sends a message through the La Serra Gardens text chat and employees show up.

The site also affects buying. There's no large backroom waiting to absorb extra inventory.

"I have no backstock," she said. "Everything is on the floor." At La Serra, product is out, layered, tucked, moved and reworked constantly.



The Café That Found Its Place

The café at La Serra had an unexpected beginning. A young family with two kids had to close their struggling bakery. They couldn't sell their larger coffee equipment. When Lisamarie and her husband went to wish them well, the wife was in tears. Lisamarie looked at her husband and said, "Why don't we just buy it and put it in the greenhouse?" So they did.

La Serra Gardens succeeds in making customers feel at home with a cafe and seating, encouraging visitors to linger, browse and relax.

It wasn't as simple as moving in a machine. They spent about \$20,000 on plumbing, electrical work, cabinets and build-out. It took a few years for the café to find its footing and her husband reminded her it eventually had to pay for itself. Now, she says, it does.

In fall and winter, hot chocolate becomes a major draw. Lisamarie makes it by hand, grating chocolate and melting it into the milk. On busy days, they can go through 10 gallons. The café changes how people use the space. They sit longer, bring friends, stop in for coffee and notice plants.

Events, Music and Community

Events are part of the La Serra experience. During the warmer season, the garden center hosts live music and comedy. On a property with 10 to 12 parking spaces, that takes creativity, help from the town, customer patience and a willingness to make the best of the property as it is.

The staff is a major part of that. La Serra has about 12 employees and many have been with Lisamarie for five to seven years. The business is open year-round, and keeping those people employed is one of her driving forces.

“Some of them have children and mortgages, and they need to pay their bills,” she said. “I have to make this business work.”

Christmas Starts Early

At La Serra, fall and Christmas planning begins almost as soon as the previous season ends and buying begins in January. “We started thinking fall and Christmas last fall and Christmas,” she said.

By August, the bones of the holiday season are already in place. Because space is limited, everything has to be incorporated, layered and reworked. For Christmas, they close for a week in early November to set up the shop. Last year, people were waiting outside at 3:00 p.m. for a 6:00 p.m. holiday open house. In previous years, the team would build displays while customers were still shopping, but pieces would sell before the displays were finished.

After that, the season becomes constant re-merchandising. Product moves. Displays shift. If someone comes in twice in one week, the same product might be in a new place, asking to be noticed again.



A Place With a Point of View

One of the reasons independent garden centers still matter is that each of us has our own point of view—the question is whether we fully embrace it. That’s something La Serra excels at. The plants, café, music, gift shop, seating areas and seasonal displays all feel like they belong to the same story.

The outdoor sales yard is just one section that’s a treasure trove of finds, beckoning customers to fully investigate the acre and a half property.

Just as important, the staff seems to understand and support that vision. Lisamarie may set the tone, but the people around her help bring it to life, whether they’re building displays, unloading trucks, making coffee or helping customers feel welcome.

Instead of condos, there are greenhouses. Instead of a cleared lot, there are gardens. Instead of another development, there’s a place where people sit with coffee, listen to music, buy plants and feel, for a little while, at home.

Last year was La Serra’s best year in seven years. Lisamarie is still learning and still thinking about the next

surprise. I've visited hundreds of garden centers, and when I first walked into this intimate store, my first thought was simple: wow. This is a really cool space. **GP**

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