

## Features

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## A Natural Progression

Ann-Marie Vazzano



Civano Nursery's story is unique. The business evolved from its founders' desire to preserve native trees. In 1998, Les Shipley, his three sons and daughter-in-law headed south from Canada to Arizona with one goal: to salvage trees from development sites and give them homes in a new, sustainable community called the Tucson Solar Village. Today, the community is referred to as the Civano development.

*Pictured: Civano Nursery specializes in plants suited for Arizona's arid climate.*

The namesake is appropriate, considering the family business saved more than 2,000 native trees in the area, according to Civano Nursery General Manager Melanie Shipley, who lives there with her husband Chris and two daughters. She operates the garden center located at the entrance to the development, just south of Tucson.

The family's initial mission of preserving desert mesquites and palo verdes soon led to a whole new business developing and growing plants suited to Arizona's arid climate, which then led to the garden center.

### Knowing What Works

As a member of The Garden Center Group, Civano Nursery has kept a close eye on the bottom line, which Mel explains requires analyzing everything from payroll to supply expenses, in addition to tracking livegoods SKUs.

"You don't really want to wait until the end of the year to figure out what's going on," she says. "You want to be right on it on a weekly basis."

She admits the first few years were tough. But constantly evaluating product mix, deleting items and services that aren't working and being open to change have helped transform the business into a \$12 million a year operation between both the growing and retailing sides.

"We're really focusing on what we do well, and what we do well is sell in our retail garden center and our wholesale growing grounds and the specific native plants that we grow," Mel says.

### The Right People

Running a business is more than just numbers, though. It's about people, too. Mel is quick to note the business has relied on help from peers in the industry.

"We don't pretend to know everything, which is a really good lesson in life," she says. "Go out and find people who do and get that help, as well."

The company prides itself on recruiting and retaining valuable team members, too, some of whom have worked there for 20-plus years. At Civano, every employee is respected and heard.

"Everybody has a voice," Mel says. "If they have an idea, we listen."

Mel credits her floor manager, Stephanie Carman, for making sure things run smoothly on the sales floor. "She's my right-hand person to get stuff done and she does it happily," says Mel.

The secret to retaining great employees, according to Mel, is to treat them like family.

"We all work together for many hours a week," she says. "We look after each other and are cognizant of burnout in the busy season and in the hotter months. That's why we have a rule of only working five days a week, no matter what, because happy people translate into a better customer experience."

And although it's not necessarily measurable through financial reports, maintaining a solid team boosts profitability. Customers come in and recognize familiar faces, creating a welcoming atmosphere. Mel herself makes it a point to be on the sales floor as often as possible. In pre-pandemic times, she was even known as "the hugger."

"It's not just about selling plants in the garden center," she says. "It's talking to [customers] and getting to know them, almost like making a friend, reminding them as well to slow down and reconnect with nature."

Mel says gardeners tend to be happy people, but when a customer is unhappy, she and her team like to get to the root of the problem.

"Generally, when a customer isn't happy about something, it's not about the plant or the service. It's something happening with them, and what I love to do is go out there and find out what it is and help if I can, or just listen," she says. "Sometimes somebody just needs a hug, right?"

## About This Series

In 2021, we will feature a different garden retailer each month from The Garden Center Group's Best Practices or Best of the Best group. These retailers achieved 10% or more profit in the previous year. The Garden Center Group offers Weekly Department Reviews, as well as an Annual P&L Study for those clients who wish to participate. Both are actionable reports that retailers can use to benchmark off of and grow sales in specific categories. Find out more at [www.thegardencentergroup.com](http://www.thegardencentergroup.com).

## A Focus On Sustainability

Civano Growers has long been known as a trailblazer with regard to developing unique, eye-catching plant varieties that thrive in Arizona's climate. It's also at the forefront of horticultural technologies, such as climate control greenhouse systems that save water. The growing operation doesn't grow everything it sells at its retail location; instead, they focus on varieties that are zone relevant.

As the business has grown over the past 20 years, the Shipley family members have also grown into their different roles in the business. Les, the patriarch of the family, oversees construction and maintenance. Nick

is the chief operations manager, overseeing daily operations of the farm and managing the team of growers. Alex has assumed the role of chief sales officer, managing the commercial sales team. Chris is the president and manages the regional sales team, supplying garden centers across the Southwest. Mel manages the retail garden center and oversees finances.

Mel credits her brother-in-law, Nick Shipley, for pioneering a lot of the plant material in their region, including native trees and shrubs that not only thrive in the climate, but are attractive, too.

"We're not just growing for the sake of growing," Mel says. "We're taking care in what we're growing so that at the end of the day, it works well for the environment and works well for the end user."

And sometimes, the end user isn't just the homeowner. "Sometimes the end user is butterflies," she says.

As a result, they've created a line of plants to attract butterflies and provide them with a healthy habitat. One example is *Asclepias x subulata* Butterfly Magic, a heat-loving, drought-tolerant milkweed that provides cream-colored flowers Monarch butterflies love.

"Human beings—I guess we tend to come in and make things the way we want them and sometimes delete nature a little bit," Mel says. "Our goal is to add back in, so go ahead and build that home and your garden here, but let's make sure it gives back to the habitat." **GP**