

## Cover Story

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## Leading by Example

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*Photography by Rachel Benavides*



It was a lifelong love of the outdoors that brought 25-year-old Wyatt Page to the garden center industry. Between gardening with his mother, and his passion for nature and outdoor sports like hiking, kayaking and surfing, it was almost a certainty that he would end up in a profession that involved nature and the outside. After a stint as a guide at a horse ranch during college, he decided to apply at every local garden center to continue his outdoor adventure.

“Which was three,” he adds with a laugh. “And, obviously, when I went into Gill’s I was like, ‘This is the one I want to work at.’”

Gill’s is Gill’s Garden Center & Landscape Co. in Corpus Christi, Texas, where Wyatt started nearly six years ago, still green as an employee and thinking (based on previous experience) that he had to use his own vehicle for the company deliveries.

“Sally Gill called me and she asked me to be a delivery guy. I said, ‘Oh yeah, I guess, I have my own car I can use.’ And then she said, ‘No, we have delivery vehicles,’” he laughs. “I started as a carryout and doing some Christmas tree deliveries at our smaller Alameda store. That store closed down about a year after I started. Then we all moved to the location we’re at

now.”

He moved up the ranks, handling jobs like carryout, deliveries, planting, cashier, sales, receiving trucks and everything in between to become an assistant manager. He says he still does those activities, too, along with his administrative responsibilities.

"I jump out there with my team," he notes. "I think it's important to be out there with everybody. It helps you connect with all your employees at every single level."

It's that pitch-in attitude that prompted General Manager Jesse Jenkins (who's in the process of taking ownership as co-owners James and Sally Gill move toward retirement) to nominate Wyatt for our Green Profit/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award this year.

In Jesse's own words: "Wyatt is an absolute superstar. That's the perfect word to describe him in our company and as a person ... His people skills are outstanding—he leads with compassion and by example. He expects good communication and engagement from everyone. When I read articles about younger generations not having as much hustle or work ethic, I think of how Wyatt embodies both of those things."

### **Maintaining the Culture**

When I asked Wyatt during our hour-long chat what he loved about being a part of the garden center, he jumped right away to the culture created by James and Sally, and maintained by the leadership team. He cites the atmosphere of respect, fun and engagement as reasons the culture has thrived and employees stay for so long. They experience minimal turnover, with even high school students returning for years at a time, and some employees staying for decades.



"I think a lot of the culture Sally and James built it up over the years, and I got to step into that," Wyatt says. "Carrying it on, you have to hold yourself to a higher standard of positivity, and you can't let the little things nip at you. Those are just little things, and as long as you can lead by example and keep a positive attitude, [you can] still be very directional and let people know what they should do."

Part of the culture and leading by example is taking time off, and we talked about that quite a bit because it can be difficult to find times for employees to take time off, but it's vital to mental health and wellbeing. Wyatt says it's important to the culture of the business to encourage employee ownership of tasks and trust them to handle those tasks in the right way, which can help supervisors take time off knowing the place is in good hands.

It's also vital when hiring new employees, especially members of the younger generation. When I asked if work-life balance is something that's important to his generation, he responded emphatically: "100%."

"That should be on every manager's radar, work-life balance, and you have to lead by example. You have to show them, 'Hey, I'm taking time off,' and you should encourage your employees to do the same."

### **More Incentives**

We talked, too, about how garden centers can attract younger employees and what they're looking for relative to incentives. Of course, as we just mentioned, a work-life balance is vital. But pay structure is also important.

"I would start out by saying company culture is the No. 1 thing—that's how you're going to keep new hires," he says. "There's a lot of people who want to work in this industry. I think pay scares a lot of people off and I think it's a hard, physical job that can scare people off as well. But at the end of the day, it's great working outdoors, with awesome people—customers and employees—in a very positive environment. And getting to work with plants makes the deal even sweeter."

"It can be a hard job, but if you have great company culture [they'll stay]. The way you do that is you have to create a place where they're going to feel valued as an employee. They have to be heard, you have to listen to them ... respect them, and you make it a fun place to work."

Gill also sweetens the pot with an employee discount and a bonus structure based on set monthly goals. “We track those sales every day and if we make that goal everybody gets a bonus,” Wyatt notes. “It’s based on how much you’re over the goal. And that’s cool because everybody knows that’s not something your company has to do for you, but it’s something they’re happy to do for us because we work so hard to make it a great place.”

### **Turning Challenge Into Opportunity**

While this year was a banner sales year for Gill (sales were continuing at a breakneck pace into July where normally it would dive in the heat of summer), it wasn’t always easy. In fact, it was downright challenging. It started around Valentine’s Day, with five days of freezing weather, three of them registering below-freezing temperatures for the entire 24-hour period. It was a nightmare for the subtropical region, which shattered records set as far back as 1865.

The team at Gill worked desperately to save plant material, and was able to save between 80% and 85% of inventory by loading up racks and hauling them into the warehouse, as well as storing plants in the administrative offices in the conference room and surrounding people’s desks.

The challenge continued as customers flooded the operation after the freeze to replace dead landscapes, a demand that continued in the summer.

“It was hard, the growers put limits on a lot of stuff ... they got hit harder than we did,” Wyatt says, adding they reached out to growers in Florida to supplement. The key to being able to source material was the solid relationships with growers they’d built over the last 40-plus years.

Employees had the challenge of handling stressed out customers, who understandably were and are concerned about the loss of landscaping around their homes. They’ve had to work at training and figuring out how to provide customer service to so many people in such a stressful time. But that was part of taking a negative and turning it into a positive of employee training.

“It was really interesting being relatively new in management and this happening,” Wyatt says. “Juggling all that was insanity. I think it was insanity for everybody. But it’s cool—we got through it, and now we have the tools to do it even better the next time.”

### **Responding to the Vibe**

The garden center not only saw business from the freeze, but continued to see an influx of new gardeners, which started at the beginning of the pandemic, who are hungry for anything to do with plants and nature.

“Just the vibe I’m getting from them is they love being outside,” Wyatt says. “They’re people who want to be outside and they love being in nature. They care about the place we live in and they want to put plants in the ground.”



The garden center has been responding to that by offering more pollinator and native options and educating about the connection between birds and pollinator insects and plants. They’re still seeing high demand for growing food, and they’ve been fielding tons of calls and requests for information about fall gardening this year, he says. Gill’s also has reduced its assortment of synthetic chemicals in favor of organic and natural approaches.

They’re also hearing more demand for their in-person garden talks, which have been on hold due to the pandemic. While they’re not sure if those will take place this fall, they’ve already met to continue to build on a video series they’ve produced and distributed with the help of a local non-profit called Grow Local. The collaboration has helped Gill get the videos out to a larger audience. (Open the camera app on your

phone and hover it over the QR code to see the video line-up from Gill.)

## Woven Threads

I would be remiss as a storyteller if I didn't include some of the unique threads that, woven together, tell Wyatt's story even better. It turns out the city of Round Rock produces a number of excellent garden center retailers. It's where Wyatt grew up, and his childhood home is just minutes from Round Rock Garden Center, where another of this year's Young Retailer Award nominees Terra Campbell works as the greenhouse department head and buyer.

In another unique twist, Wyatt met Jesse's wife way before he actually met Jesse in the garden center, as she was his professor for a painting class at Texas A&M Corpus Christi, where Wyatt earned his bachelor's degree in arts with an emphasis on ceramics. "I met Jesse later and he was like, 'I think you know my wife,'" Wyatt adds, laughing.

It's those threads that bind together to create Wyatt's story and is indicative of the industry as a whole—incidental contacts that continue to inform and change us as we move forward. He cites this as something that our industry does really well.

"Compared to other businesses I think we take care of each other," he says. "We have The Garden Center Group, the Cultivate conference; we're able to communicate with other garden centers, ask questions, take advice and give advice, so I think that's super cool.

"I just met Terra and Esmeralda (Carrasco, vice president of operations at Ponderosa Cactus Nursery, our other Young Retailer Award nominee this year) and now we can say 'Hey, what's up?'"

As for where we need more work? "Technology," he answers without hesitation. "We're a little behind the curve there."



He (and he's not the only one) would like to see more online ordering being offered by growers of all sizes (which we'll be addressing in the magazine in the near future). On the retail side, while they aren't as enthusiastic about offering e-commerce since they prefer to drive traffic to the store, they would like to offer the ability for customers to see inventory online.

They've been working hard on the POS side, too, to analyze the data (which was Jesse's specialty prior to joining the garden center) and look closely at the top sellers and cut the bottom feeders. It's important to stay

focused, too, on what brought you to the dance and that's the customer service Gill's is known for, Wyatt says.

"No. 1 customer service is what we're known for, for our plant knowledge and advice on taking care of your plants. Fairness to our customers, to our employees," he says. "We have the best plants, we have a passion for plants and we have a passion for landscapes, and people know that down here." **GP**

*Pictured: Young Retailer Award Winner Wyatt Page (left) with (from left to right) DeAnna Baumgartner, Josh Williams, Shianna Thompson and Diego Deleon at Gill's Garden Center & Landscape Co. in Corpus Christi, Texas.*



## The Rundown on Wyatt Page

*Age:* 25

*Operation:* Gill's Garden Center & Landscape Co.

*Location:* Corpus Christi, Texas

*Size:* 1 location, 3 acres total; 1.5 acres retail garden center, 1.5 acres landscape

*Sales:* \$3 million garden center, about \$2 million landscape

Top 5 Retail Categories:

1. Shrubs
2. Soils
3. Hardgoods
4. Annuals
5. Perennials