

Features

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Keeping Plants Accessible

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If you can thank the recent pandemic for any good outcomes, count among the dozens of plant shops found in urban locales that popped up across the country. Among them is The Plant Store, opened by a farm-raised North Carolinian by the name of Richard Ashe who moved to Tampa, Florida, in 2020. Beginning as a 10 ft. x 10 ft. booth at local markets, The Plant Store is now a small retail location in Tampa's North Hyde Park neighborhood, close to University of Tampa and other neighborhoods populated with students and Millennials.

Pictured: Owner Richard Ashe and Operations Manager Geo Ciecierski

The Popular Plants *The Plant Store's more popular plants are some of the usuals. The *Monstera adansonii*, for example, is a hit with customers. Richie buys them in as 2- and 4-ft. vine lengths because people like to have ready-to-cascade, display-worthy plants that they can put up high. The crocodile fern is another popular plant due to its relative ease to care for. A 24-pot shipment of crocodile fern will sell through in just two weeks. Calathea are big sellers, too; Richie and staff know these are sensitive to metals in tap water and are sure to provide the information customers need to know to grow them successfully (use distilled water!). And *Pilea peperomioides*, of course, keeps its popular streak rolling.*

On a visit to the store in January, I was struck by several of The Plant Store's objectives. First among them is that Richard actively investigates the sources of the nursery plants he acquires, making sure he works with only Florida-based nurseries who responsibly source their plants. Why? Because illegal plant poaching and the inevitable environmental degradation it causes has become a thing.

Second, education. "Customers are primarily looking for a houseplant to take care of but they might not necessarily know exactly how to take care of it," Richard says. "So our customers come in, ask a lot of questions and pretty much find the plant that works in their environment." That one-on-one interaction in order to help the customer is Job One for Richard and staff.

And third, The Plant Store intentionally keeps plant and product prices low in order to hopefully lower a bar to plant purchasing. You'll read more about the whys of that in the following photo montage.



Keeping Plants Affordable

The Plant Store believes in keeping plants accessible to everyone, which translates into keeping them affordable. These 8-in. *Monstera deliciosa* and *Ficus lyrata* are just \$29 apiece (without the deco pot). The crocodile fern, mentioned previously, is just \$19 per pot, less expensive than Richie has found elsewhere. Keeping plants priced for purchase means folks keep coming back. Couple that with attention to customer service and plant parent education and you get a loyal customer base.

Love These Lights

These Aspect lights from Soltech Solutions are tops in Richie's book. He likes that they have a color suitable for home use—nothing too hard, but a nice balance of white and yellow light. They are not just suitable for plant growth but also add a darn-nice decorative element to a home's décor (they come in both white and black casings). Bonus points for having a bulb that lasts for 15 years and also for being made in the USA.

Creative and Inclusive Containers

These risqué pots are hot sellers at The Plant Store. They are made by Group Partner Ceramic Studio in Brooklyn, New York. According to the company's website, ceramicist Isaac Nichols' work focuses on "positive body images, sexuality and a love for plants." Richie and staff love them because the form and colors—which include a range of skin tones—are inclusive and equitable. They sell out quickly, too. Another bonus: Some customers take them home and paint clothing on the pottery. To see the uncut versions, visit group-partner.com.

Tops in Testers

Sticking to the "a great product at a reasonable price" theme, these soil testers from Classy Casita are a hit with both staff and customers for just that reason. Richie appreciates that the company keeps the wholesale prices low so they, too, can keep the product within reach. Also a note about the packaging: on the back of each is a set of use instructions as well as a Plant Watering Guide indicating which plants to water when the meter is registering a certain moisture level. Genius!

Benefits of Membership

The Plant Store's loyalty program, the Plant Parenthood Club, is getting a refresh. The Club had been a fee-based program with an annual charge of \$75. This would give members 35% off plants and 25% off everything else in the store. The program will change to free membership with yet to be determined percentages off plant and pottery purchases. They'll also institute some sort of points program. Why the change? Again, it's a way for plants and associated perks to be accessible for all. **GP**