

Cover Story

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A Lesson in Determination

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Ashleigh Munro, garden center coordinator at Kiwi Nurseries and this year's Young Retailer Winner, started her entrepreneurial career early on, taking babysitting jobs and running various (mostly legit) businesses out of her school locker. But she never officially wanted to go into the family business, at the time a commercial landscaping operation started in 1979 by her parents, Murray and Alison Munro.

"When I was 21 they asked me to come in and make a computer system because all of our invoices were by hand," Ashleigh recalls. "I came in to make the computer system on the understanding I'd only be there for one year. I avoided the family business actively for years because to me it wasn't a business, it was your chores and your work you do to help your family out.

"I wanted a real job somewhere else that wasn't family based. And then I got stuck and haven't left since."

She says stuck, but it's in a good-natured way, making it clear she enjoys the challenge of running the day-to-day operations of the burgeoning garden center business that gradually started growing out of the commercial landscape business. Her sister Kathryn began drawing in more residential customers before leaving for a project manager job with the city, opening the door for Ashleigh to build the retail operation to what it is today.

First, a Real Job

Let me back up a bit. She did work outside the business for a bit before joining up with the family. Her first real job



was at A&W, a fast-food restaurant where for two and a half years she learned just how important efficiency was in the retail business.

“It was a great experience because it taught me about procedures, how to work efficiently and how to work in a team environment, which I really appreciated,” she says.

School was never her favorite, as she’s dyslexic, but she never stopped learning, soaking up more experiences and learning more about business by taking on multiple jobs—in one year she held eight jobs and at one point she worked three at one time. The goal was to save up enough money to move to New Zealand, the country from which her parents emigrated to Canada. She succeeded and moved there for a while until her mom enrolled her in a school for entrepreneurs (Alison is very pro-education, Ashleigh says) and bought her a plane ticket home. Ashleigh finished school and went to work for Hole’s, a well-known garden center and growing operation in Edmonton that’s now out of business.

“They taught me a lot about the retail center because we had never done that before,” she says of her time at Hole’s. “It was very eye-opening to see the customer service, the types of plants you could have and not just the commercial ones that were your staples you’re used to.”

After her experience at Hole’s, it was time to come back to Kiwi Nurseries and get that computer system started. During that time she wanted to really give the garden center business a go, and Murray gave her a challenge, thinking retail wouldn’t work because of all the box store competition.

“He originally gave me the challenge of ‘you have five years to make it profitable’ and I was able to do it in two. So I was pretty happy,” Ashleigh says, adding the sales numbers have doubled every year after with the exception of 2019. And then, of course, came 2020, where the numbers quadrupled.



Why it's Worked

There have been a couple of key reasons why the garden center and wholesale business have worked as well as they have, and technology has played a big role in those. For example, as soon as she started, Ashleigh implemented text message ordering for landscape customers. It gave them a way to get their orders in efficiently and she could text pictures of products to make their selections. Remember, this was back in 2012, and that was definitely not standard operating procedure for most nurseries.

She also developed a brand new website to set them apart from competitors. “I spent the time making a website right off the bat that would give you local information and we used local pictures,” she notes. “It took a lot of time to do that, but it’s been worth it and I’m continually updating it as we go.”

Because they run with a limited number of employees (full-time includes Ashleigh, her semi-retired parents minus trips to New Zealand in the winter, and one other person, and 35 part-time employees during peak season), they have to work quickly and efficiently. Her dad taught her something about efficiency, being able to do commercial landscape jobs with a team of four that would take others 12 people to complete.

She looks to local high school and college students for hiring because they’re tech-savvy and adaptable. Plus, she can train them so they don’t bring bad habits from other retail jobs into the nursery.



Working fast and being flexible is actually one of the things Ashleigh loves most about being at Kiwi Nurseries.

“My biggest thing that I love that I hated with all my other jobs is if I see something that’s not working I can fix it and I can change it immediately,” she says. “I don’t have to go through the levels of bureaucracy that I found everywhere else.

“I hate being told no. I like to find an answer and a solution to a problem to make everyone’s life easier. So being able to get that latitude from my parents to allow

me to do things, even if they didn’t think it was a good idea, still worked out. It allowed me to explore things.”

Always Adapting & Learning

It’s that determined spirit of working the problem and finding solutions that has helped Ashleigh drive the business forward. She saw early on that the key to creating the experiences new customers were looking for was events. Prior to the company’s 40th anniversary they never held any events. Then they held 40 events to celebrate 40 years, jumping head-first into hosting customers on the property for events like classes, paint night, craft beer night and a wildly successful Easter Egg hunt that scared them a bit with the turnout (about 400 kids). She bought a coffee trailer, too, to be able to serve beverages during the events.

They kept going and continued to host activities like their popular Haunted House, and they’re constantly looking at ways to improve on events to make them more successful. For example, this year they’re adding an Adult Night to the Halloween festivities, complete with partnering with a liquor company, bringing in a fortune teller and having s’mores roasted over a fire. She got more ideas for Halloween-themed events from Cultivate, too, like having a parade for kiddos to show off their costumes. They’re also looking at having a Senior Day with tea and coffee so seniors who have the ability can enjoy the grounds and meet their families out there. She’s working hard to engage customers of all ages to make memories at the nursery.

“A lot of people want more than just a shop now, they want that experience to go with it,” she says. “They want that feel-good moment; they want to talk to people who understand them and they don’t feel intimidated by them.”

Facing the Challenges

When I asked Ashleigh about challenges, I expected the usual supply chain/staffing issues, but she surprised me.

“For us, it’s actually growing. At the point we’re at now, I need a new facility or I can’t grow,” she says. “Since we’re in the country I’ve been trying to get a building permit for a while and it’s hard because in the winter, I’m working out of a 100-year-old farmhouse. So my main level is about 200 sq. ft. and that’s all I have for sales space.

“We’ve been trying to put an addition on to it, been trying to get permits, but trying to get that kind of information from the county of what they want has been really difficult. And then from there the next step that I could do is building an actual garden center. That’s what we’re currently looking into right now, but I don’t have city sewer, I don’t have city water, I still have



satellite internet. So there's a lot of logistical problems in trying to grow to the next level."

Pictured: Kiwi Nurseries added a coffee trailer to its onsite offerings, a nice addition to the events held on the grounds.

She did say staffing can be a challenge, but not quite in the same way as most operations have. Because her employees include a lot of high school and college students, she's been working to train them how to read a customer's body language and how to impart the knowledge they've learned about the plants confidently.

"Being Canadian, we say sorry a lot. But if you say sorry too often, sometimes you lose credibility," she says, adding it's also a challenge to get students to ask questions. They shy away from asking questions in school, but the key to retail and engaging customers is asking questions. Changing that mindset can be a big hurdle in staff training.

The Future of Retail

I asked Ashleigh where she thinks the garden center industry is heading in the next five years and she was clear with her answer.

"I think it's going to be one of those that either you have to adapt and move to the future, or you're going to get left behind, and some of the businesses that don't change and adapt are going to sadly fall out of existence," she says.

It's vital to connect with customers where they are, including online and through social media, not just posting, but responding to questions and watching reviews, she says. Technology plays an increasing role in retail and she's on the watch for new tech they can implement to adapt to the times. She's looking at point-of-sale systems now, since the current one she has doesn't work with their website, and her goal is for landscapers to be able to see product availability online.

Balancing it All

Ashleigh is the first to admit she doesn't focus on work-life balance. "I love going to work and it's what I do, so it is hard not to go," she says. When she's not working (which isn't often), she loves to learn and travel, so she takes in industry conferences and stays a few days to visit the city she's in. She also travels back to New Zealand every three to four years for multiple weeks at a time to visit family there and enjoy the beautiful weather.

Ashleigh spends time with her two Jack Russell terriers and has played the distinctly Canadian sport of ringette since she was 5 years old (think hockey with less contact and a ring instead of a puck). And she loves to keep learning, taking online classes, as well as volunteer with local non-profits and helping others with their businesses.

It's that drive and determination to keep learning and adapting that will take Kiwi Nurseries well into the future.

About Kiwi Nurseries

Location: Acheson, Alberta, Canada

Size: 224 acres total; 5.5 acres retail, 100 acres tree production, 100 acres in alfalfa and peas, the rest native bush and trail system

Sales in 2022: 2.8 million CAD (approximately \$2.2 million USD)

Top 5 sales categories:

1. Large caliper trees
2. Potted trees
3. Shrubs
4. Services

5. Perennials

What They're Known For: Prairie-hardy plants and honest gardening advice

Website: www.kiwinurseries.com