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A Tale of Three Retailers

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In May, I took to the rolling hills of mid-Ohio to visit the three stops on this summer's Cultivate'22 Retail Tour. Those three stops—Richardson's Greenhouse in Loudonville, The Gardens at Country Gatherings/Sheiyah Market in Berlin, and Baker's Acres in Alexandria—are all very different in their customer base, offerings and philosophies. But that's what makes this such a great grouping—you can see a wide swath of Ohio retailers and how they lean in to their respective markets and not just survive, but thrive. Here are some highlights and make sure you watch out for details on next year's Cultivate Retail Tour!

Richardson's Greenhouse

This grower-retailer in Loudonville (in the heart of a beautiful area near the Mohican River) has been in business for almost 80 years—next year will be the 80th. When I visited, they were coming off a record-breaking Mother's Day Weekend, which topped their previous record breaker (Mother's Day 2020) by nearly 30%!

Pictured: The beautiful mixed containers and wide variety of plants available at Richardson's Greenhouse.

• *The shrub yard and roses, most of which are grown by*

Ed Sloan. He grows the roses in the pulp containers, which he says helps them develop a healthier root zone. It's the way his wife Rinda's father grew them.

It was easy to see why, too. The plant material was top-quality and the prices were a shopper's dream. We did talk about the pricing a bit and they don't feel the market around them will bear going up much more than they already did this year, being a rural area with about 3,000 people in town. They did raise prices some, though, to counteract the effects of rising prices on inputs like plastic and media.

The business is family-owned and operated in its third generation with co-owners and sisters Rinda Sloan and Robin Voltz, along with Rinda's husband Ed and their son Gunnar (who is fourth generation working in the business).

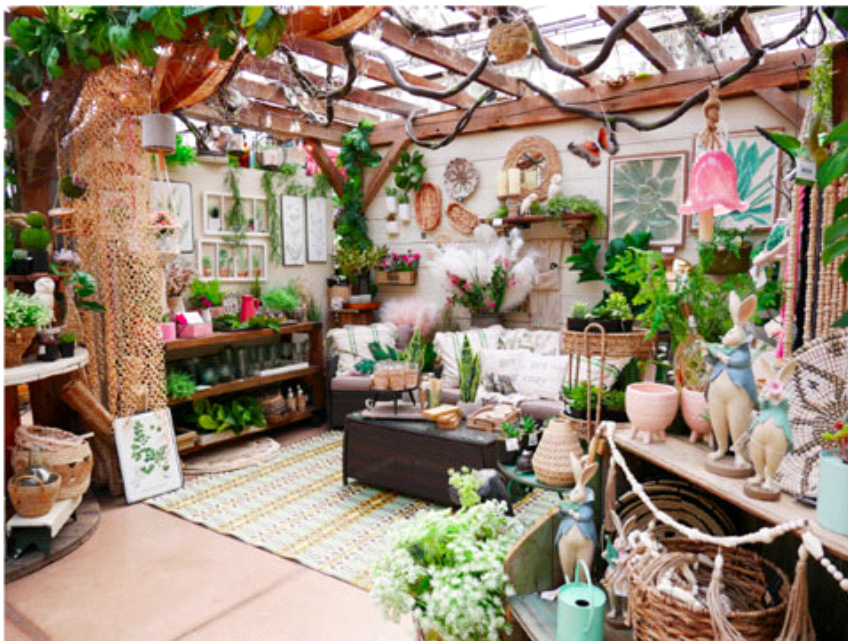
Rinda told me what they hear most from their customers is an appreciation for the variety of plants offered. They grow most of their annuals, and Ed grows a lot of their shrubs and roses. Another aspect Rinda is very proud of is having pricing on all the product along with lots of signage. She knows it can get frustrating for customers if they can't find a price.

They've also gotten deeper into houseplants and tropicals, and those offerings have helped them stay open during the off season.

"There were times before we'd go days in the winter without seeing anybody," Rinda says. "There was somebody here every day this year."



The Gardens at Country Gatherings



(Sheiyah Market)

You.Could.Spend.All.Day.Here.

There's a lot to see that's not just the garden part—The Gardens is part of a larger complex of shops called Sheiyah Market in Berlin, which IS Amish Country in Ohio. There's a coffee shop, a farmhouse-style store, a more upscale boutique and the gardens, which equals a LOT to look at.

The Gardens started as a way to sell fairy gardening plants and supplies on the porch of the Country Gatherings shop. It expanded into a 7,500-sq. ft. greenhouse about five or six years ago, says Mikayla Gray, garden center manager. A second greenhouse went up about two to three years ago.

Pictured: An overall shot of one section of the greenhouse at The Gardens at Country Gatherings. • An example of one vignette as soon as you cross from Country Gatherings into the greenhouse.

The store buys in all its offerings and they have a rather unique customer base in that a lot of it is tourist foot traffic (and there's a lot of that coming through Amish country on a regular basis). That evens out their peaks and keeps business steady March through November. Of course, they still experience peak sales in May, but the valleys don't get quite as low. She says they typically see 10,000 to 11,000 visitors a week throughout a good chunk of the year.

Each store has its own buyer and its own look and feel. Within The Gardens, they do a really great job of creating a meandering, relaxed shopping experience with lots of vignettes and mixed products (books with small containers with plants with collectibles, that kind of thing).

This is less a store of "I want to buy eight to 10 of a specific variety" (although you could if you wanted to) and more of a "I want that and that and that" because of the impulse shopping aspect of the layout.

One other piece to note: I talked to Tara, who's worked there for a year now, who told me about their Gardenistas of Sheiyah VIP insider group. It started last July and already has 850 members. You can join by snapping the QR code posted in the store. Members are told first about unique plants that are coming into the market, and have an online community where they build plant wish lists and can receive plant consultations. Cool idea!



Baker's Acres

I rolled into Baker's Acres in Alexandria as my last stop of the day on a (very) warm Tuesday after Mother's Day. Please note, if you see gaps in plant material in my photos, it's because Baker's had a record-breaking Mother's Day. Chris Baker started the Alexandria operation 40 years ago (happy anniversary!) with his wife, Nancy.

"We liked to do unusual stuff," Chris says. "But we have a lot of the bread and butter, too."

They started out with annuals and perennials, but Chris' son Nick has helped the business expand into succulents first, then houseplants and more tropicals. "He's got stuff people fight over," Chris adds.

Chris has a strong interest in begonias and coleus, and the collections for those are quite vast and something to keep an eye out for. Chris has bred several coleus varieties that are on the market through various companies, including three through Dümmer Orange.

The houseplant section is a hot segment that keeps growing in sales. Nick does Friday night web drops where on Facebook he'll preview several different houseplants—sometimes he'll have only one and for others he'll have half a dozen. Then they go live for sale on the website at 9:00 p.m. During a recent sale, a rare anthurium sold for \$1,750 at 9:01 p.m. Purchasers have a week to pick them up in the store.

Another great aspect of Baker's Acres is the vibe—it's very chill, laid back and fun. Chris, who has a music degree, cultivates an eclectic mix of music on his iPod to play in the store, and I thoroughly enjoyed the shopping experience while listening to his tunes.

Baker's has definitely made a name for itself when it comes to offering unique plants and customers come from Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Rochester and even Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. They often have food trucks and special events, too, to drive traffic and keep customers coming back for more.

"We like to grow stuff people can't get anywhere else ... We like to make people happy," Chris says simply. **GP**

Pictured: Staff members were working hard to fill in the gaps after a record-breaking Mother's Day Weekend, but customers were still buying it up. • Chris Baker has a colorful coleus collection—say that five times fast! • Rare houseplants and unique tropicals are a specialty at Baker's Acres.

