

Today's GardenCenter

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Leading the Revolution in Garden Retailing

The Good Earth Garden
Center & Nurseries

Expert Advice

Julie Curtis

Gregg
Curtis

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cover story

The Good Earth Garden Center & Nurseries

Owners: Gregg and Julie Curtis

Location: Little Rock, Ark.

Size: 5 acres

Annual Sales: \$5.3 million

Revolutionary Niche: Owners and staff are positioned as the gardening experts in the Little Rock area.

Website: TheGoodEarthGarden.com



Expert Advice

The Good Earth Garden Center builds a successful retail operation by providing helpful information and establishing trust.

Photo Credit: Mary Tellez

by Richard Jones, Group Editor
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There's a lot for gardeners to like about a visit to the Good Earth Garden Center & Nurseries. A great selection of perennials grown on site. Five acres in a park-like setting. Relaxing water features. A 100-year-old stand of pine trees providing shade for customers to stroll through the grounds.

But it may be the trust customers have in the Good Earth Garden Center & Nurseries that has helped the business grow from \$800,000 to \$5.3 million in sales since Gregg and Julie Curtis bought the operation 12 years ago.

"We've had some incredible growth the last few years," Gregg Curtis says. "West Little Rock has grown a lot of course, but I think a lot of it is attributed to the team we've put together. We try to position ourselves as the expert in town."

Spreading The Word

Curtis doesn't wait for customers to

come to the garden center to provide them with information and help. In fact, many Little Rock gardeners probably recognize him before they ever set foot in The Good Earth Garden Center.

"There is a local publication called *Life in Chenal*, and we write a monthly article for them," Curtis says. The magazine is mailed to all residents in the upscale residential neighborhood of Chenal, and Curtis' articles and helpful tips pull these coveted customers into the garden center.

The Good Earth Garden Center also has a radio presence five or six times a year. Curtis makes himself available as a gardening expert for any radio program that asks.

"I get to go on these talk radio stations and it's just three hours where people call and ask anything they want to ask. That's as much fun as anything I get to do," he says. "The stations know they can call any time on the spur of the moment and I'll do it."

And the best part, he says, is all this exposure doesn't cost him a cent. "I did my own show in the past that I paid for but I

really like the three hours free rather than paying for 30 minutes."

The other piece of The Good Earth Garden Center's multimedia strategy is free as well, but it's also very high profile. Curtis is the gardening expert on the Little Rock Fox television affiliate. He is the star of the "Good Earth Green House" segment every Thursday evening on the station's 9 p.m. newscast. It's been a big reason for the garden center's success, and all he had to do to make it happen, Curtis says, was ask.

"Fox 16 was a fledgling station here several years ago. They wanted me to advertise and I told them I would if they would try to get me on the station to do a gardening segment. It just took off from there. They've become the No. 1 station here so it's been a blessing," he says.

The benefit of having three minutes in front of thousands of viewers each week almost can't be measured, Curtis says. "I couldn't pay for that. A 30 second ad is \$400. I'm on there 3 minutes every week, 52 weeks a year. It's humbling to see the

reaction from people when we get preempted by something. The station makes sure we still tape a segment – 30 people e-mailed them asking where we were the last time we missed it.”

A few segments have been recorded at the garden center, but most are shot in front of a little “greenhouse” Curtis built at the television station.

“I talk about whatever I want. We do annuals and perennials. I talked about fire ants the other day. I even did poison ivy recently,” he says. And from the beginning, he could tell that his appearances paid off with customers in the garden center.

“I can recommend products in the segments. We don’t take compensation for that – I just recommend products we like. But the next day people come in asking for whatever I was talking about. If I get six people come in within 24 hours I know that’s a good result. People are hungry to take care of a problem,” he says.

On-Site Experts

One way The Good Earth Garden Center has achieved expert status with its customers is to make sure it has the most knowledgeable staff possible. “We have six Arkansas Certified Nurserymen on staff. I think it’s probably more than anyone in the state,” Curtis says.

While the certification isn’t required to work in the nursery, Curtis says he does encourage it among his staff. “Probably 40 percent of the retail staff is certified. We promote it with the ones we think have a pretty good chance of passing

the test. They have to have a really good knowledge of plants and how to design. They have to know botanical names.”

Curtis pays for the employees text books and the test. “It’s up to a \$600 investment we make, but it more than pays for itself with the help they give our customers.”

Sustainability is another area of expertise for The Good Earth.

“Arkansas is a farming state. I still



More Online

Read about another of Gregg Curtis’ unique business ventures and watch video from The Good Earth’s television segments at TodayGardenCenter.com.

get complaints about why we don’t have malathion or Dursban. But we’re really moving to organic,” Curtis says.

“We got into more composting this year, especially with the Worm Factory. It’s a small, self-contained unit and you can compost a half pound of food a day with about 10,000 worms. I’ve given a lot of them away to schools,” he says.

Organic products for the gardener aren’t the only area Curtis is interested in. The Good Earth was a member of the team responsible for installing a green roof at the Clinton Presidential Library. And he’s also working on achieving LEED certification to make his own business

more sustainable. “We’re getting closer. We’re still trying to figure out something with our heating unit, but we’re converting over to recycled paper and changing all our lightbulbs.”

While there’s been some customer interest so far, the move toward sustainability is personally important to him.

“I know it works if you can promote it. Once we get our certification I’ll start promoting a lot more. I can say we’re LEED certified. It makes us the expert.”

Tightening Up The Product Mix

Another step Curtis has taken to help customers over the last few years is cutting the number of SKUs he carries.

“We’ve really reduced our product mix. I’d say 95 or 98 percent of the stuff on the shelf we have used personally,” he says.

In the beginning, the cuts were primarily meant to reduce the space devoted to chemicals and allow Curtis to get more big ticket items like bronze sculptures and outdoor carpeting in the garden center. The result, however, was another opportunity to play the role of expert.

“People were getting confused. We had to spend time walking back here and explain the difference between three different \$4.99 items,” Curtis says. “Now when they walk back here and see Weed Out Plus by Ferti-lome, it’s the only weed killer back here, so they assume it’s the one they need to use. They just pick it up. It’s making life easier for them and easier for us. And it’s making us the expert because we picked it out for them.” TGC



Always Changing

Gregg and Julie Curtis understand the importance of keeping things fresh for their garden center customers. And not just the products they sell – that goes for the garden center itself, too.

“We’ve changed the overall appearance of the place over the years,” Gregg says. “I’m having to work with what used to be a warehouse with a rollup door. We’ve added a lot of doors. We’ve added skylights. We try to repaint the inside a different color just about every winter and we try to make some major change every winter so our customers who don’t come in from September to March will come here in the spring and say, ‘Wow! Is this the same place?’”

Little touches make a difference, too.

“Our delivery driver is also a very good artist, so our chalkboard behind the cash register is a work of art. He changes that out about four times a year. People are amazed when they come in and see that.”

