



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Tom Tinguely, President

The Great Outdoors, Austin, TX

The Great Outdoors Is More Than Just 'Your Average Garden Center'



Tucked under 2 acres of majestic oak trees, The Great Outdoors defines itself as an urban garden center by location – but a rustic destination by its scenery. The full-service garden center offers up all kinds of plants – from seasonal vegetables, perennials, palm trees, water plants to orchids – pottery, gifts, decor, tools and supplies. The specialty of this bustling retailer, located off the vibrant, eclectic South Congress Avenue in Austin, TX, includes plants of the tropical variety, such as succulents, bamboo and unusual houseplants.

The Great Outdoors has always employed an earth-friendly, eco-conscious approach, especially in the products they carry – before the eco-friendly movement started gaining traction. “We’ve always carried more natural products,” President Tom Tinguely says. “We live in Austin, and Austin is more of an earth-friendly neighborhood, so it works well for us.”

Austin’s South Congress Avenue neighborhood is also known for its unique character and variety of boutiques, galleries, restaurants and music venues. This vibrant neighborhood is a hot spot of activity, teeming with Millennial renters and homeowners, who are perfectly poised to spend money beautifying their homes and landscapes with lush greenery. Needless to say, The Great Outdoors doesn’t have trouble attracting the next generation of gardeners in to shop.

The Great Outdoors’ in-house restaurant, Sage Café, helps draw in foot traffic and sales, especially during slower gardening months. Sage Café, which was added to the property in 2001, offers smoothies, sandwiches, wraps, salads, and fair trade teas and coffees. The restaurant is open for breakfast and lunch.



“We constantly see our customers walk around with a smoothie or coffee, or they’ll stop in for lunch before shopping around the store for new ideas for their gardens,” Tom says.

In addition to Sage Café, Tom has created another avenue to differentiate his business and brand – an event venue space called The Hummingbird House. Located in the same part of Austin, The Hummingbird House was once Tom’s country home. He lived there for almost 30 years, where he carefully manicured the gardens into a beautiful space touched by nature’s beauty. After Tom moved closer to the garden center, he would stay there on the weekends and host private parties for family and friends.



The idea to convert the house into an event venue came after Tom’s niece got married on the property. The landscaped, colorful garden, coupled with the giant palm and oak trees and living walls on-site, offer a memorable space for weddings, birthday parties, charity events, corporate gatherings and more.

“We have a really good reputation,” Tom says. “It helps sell the venue. And because we can get plants for less since it’s a part of our business, we can afford to keep the grounds and gardens looking extraordinarily beautiful.”



The Great Outdoors is always in sync with the latest trends, products and plants in the industry – Tom and his team make it a point to stay active in industry groups and associations, such as Garden Centers of America, the Texas Nursery & Landscape Association and The Garden Center Group. “It’s not a competition in these associations – you’re all there to share ideas and what has worked for you,” says Adam Coffin, General Manager.

They make sure to attend industry trade shows, like the IGC Show in Chicago, to recharge their creative batteries and bring home the latest in product to their customers.

“The IGC Show has helped us relight the fire,” Adam says. “There’s so much inspiration, education and information to take away. Even if we only implement one or two things we found at the show, it still benefits our business for the rest of our careers.”

The IGC Show Garden Center Tour, in particular, offers Tom, Adam and the rest of The Great Outdoors’ crew an opportunity to get a retail refresh and see their store with a new perspective.

“The IGC Show and tour have been really helpful for us,” Tom says. “They’re very informative and full of information we could actually use.”



Store Ambiance Speaks Volumes

Back in 1985, Tom earned his living running an interiorscape business, but he was looking for a change of scene. He sold his company and ventured into lawn maintenance. Eventually, he added landscape design and installation services to the mix.



With all the extra landscape equipment, Tom needed space to store everything. That’s when he found the property on South Congress Avenue. Slowly, the business expanded to include retail services and Sage Café.

At the time, Tom operated four different businesses – lawn maintenance, landscape design and installation, a full-service garden center and a restaurant. “It became more than I really wanted to do, so I decided to scale back and just focus on the retail,” he says.

And he’s made sure to update and expand his retail offerings to stay fresh and current. The retailer expanded its succulents area dramatically over the last few years as the trend has grown. Shade structures and sun-reflecting shade fabric were added throughout the outdoor nursery area to help combat the hot summertime weather in Austin.

It’s little additions like the shade cloth that help contribute to a favorable in-store shopping experience. The store’s ambiance – with the trickling sounds of a large waterfall feature and the lush greenery – encourages customers to come and walk around. Tom boasts that they have “the world’s largest wind chime,” which customers enjoy ringing when they come in. The wildlife on-site is equally as popular as the scenery, contributing to a memorable experience.

“We have some parrots that people love to come see and talk to,” Tom says. “We also give fish food to the kids to feed the koi in our big water pond.”

The Great Outdoors’ knowledgeable and passionate staff garners five-star reviews from customers. Tom makes sure that his employees are always equipped with the most up-to-date product and plant knowledge.

During a recent training meeting, Adam encouraged every staff member to choose a specific area of interest in gardening where they can become the expert in for the store. “Everybody is excited about getting a book and learning everything they can about whatever it is that they’re really passionate about in gardening,” he says.

Vendors are invited to the store for product training, getting staff members more comfortable with what they’re selling. Every employee who attends the training is given the opportunity to pick one product for free and take it home to try out. They not only get more acquainted with the product, they’re able to provide helpful recommendations about it to customers after having used it firsthand.

Adam says, “Word of mouth – when it’s honest – means so much more than just reading off a label.”

The Great Outdoors’ repertoire of plant material, decor, knowledgeable staff, food, services and an event venue puts the indie garden retailer a notch above the “average garden center.” Its services and selection suit every type of gardener – from novices to diehard green thumbs. The love of gardening is shared with each and every customer, highlighting that it isn’t just a hobby at The Great Outdoors – it’s a lifestyle and a passion.

