



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

David Christakes, Co-Owner & President of Green Goods

Alsip Home & Nursery, Frankfort, IL & St. John, IN

Alsip Home & Nursery's Second-Generation Leadership Is Making Customers Happy & 'Living the Dream'



Green thumbs in Northwest Indiana and Chicagoland know where to go when they need anything relating to their homes, loved ones and furry friends. Alsip Home & Nursery, with two full-service retail garden center locations in St. John, IN, and Frankfort, IL, makes it their purpose to meet customers' needs and be a destination, touting their motto: Create a memorable shopping experience every day. And they do just that with their in-depth listing of categories and services, delivered by team members who are known for their top-notch customer service.

"We look at everyone like they're our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and grandparents," David Christakes, Co-Owner and President of Green Goods, says. "We talk to them like they're family, and we're happy to see them."

You can't teach the art of great customer service – it's an inherent trait of someone's personality. So David makes it a point to seek out people with great personalities, as opposed to horticulture masters. "I'll see customers shake my employees' hands after they're done talking, and that's how you know you did it right," he says. "You can't get a handshake from Amazon, and you can't get eye contact from Wayfair."

David believes the e-commerce world will try to capture the essence of the garden center industry, which we've seen Amazon already try with the Plants Store. But since it is a tangible, need-to-feel-before-purchasing business, customers will still want to shop in-store.



But why pick one, David says. Alsip Home & Nursery operates an online store off the website at www.alsipnursery.com, selling almost every category that's featured in-store. They also partner with Bower & Branch to offer trees through the online portal. "There's no reason you can't cater to both types of customers," he says.

Alsip Home & Nursery keeps customers coming back for more, with departments in fairy gardening, seasonal holiday and garden decor, grills, pool supplies, patio furniture, birding and pet supplies, specialty foods, statuary and fountains, gifts, toys and more. Both locations lease space to pet rescue operations: Humane Indiana South Shelter at St. John and Cache Creek Animal Rescue at Frankfort.

Shoppers can even get their furry friends groomed at Groomingdales Pet Salon while they shop – a service that's available at both stores. The St. John location takes it a step further with an on-site veterinarian at the Animal Care Center of St. John.

While the two locations have the same departments and offerings, they still differ in the way they do business. About 70 percent of St. John's sales are wholesale, and 95 percent of Frankfort's are retail. In 2008, Alsip Home & Nursery purchased a wholesale growing operation in Kingsbury, IN, and reopened it as Kingsbury Acres Greenhouse. With the addition of the wholesale sister company, and production space at both retail locations, Alsip Home & Nursery grows most of its annuals, hanging baskets, planters, bedding plants and some perennials.



By 2015, the Alsip brand opened a retail location next to the Kingsbury Acres Greenhouse, called Blooms Greenhouse Grower Outlet. "That has been doing extremely well," David says. "We've almost quadrupled sales in four years. We had this plan that we've been molding and shaping in our other retail stores for years, so it was a very seamless transition. We didn't have to guess on what would sell. We knew what would move."

Alsip Home & Nursery runs a Farm to Table Market CSA program out of both retail locations, and David says it's been a great program. They've partnered with local growers for the produce, which they drop off every early Saturday morning between June and October for a total of 22 weeks. Customers who are subscribed to the program with a half-share or a full-share earn 10 percent off select items in the store on designated pick-up Saturdays.



“It’s nice because you’re doing most of your sign-ups in the first quarter when garden centers typically are bleeding money, so it’s great to have that cash inflow,” he says. “It’s a good program financially, and it wasn’t that difficult to find local growers. Two of the vendors we use go to our local farmer’s market on Sundays. Customers still choose to get our CSA shares, because they get a slight discount on the produce.”

While David is constantly finding ways he can improve and streamline the way his garden centers conduct business, he is not eager to make changes just to attract a certain generation of shoppers – Millennials – to the stores. During the 2017 GCA Summer Tour to Virginia, David had the opportunity to sit down with Tour Director Robert Hendrickson, who has since retired as a retail consultant from the industry, to talk about business.

“We were talking about Millennials, and I didn’t ask the question, but it came up in the discussion, and Robert said, ‘Just be who you want your customers to be,’” David says. “If you want to attract Millennials, don’t try to be hip or whatever you think they need you to be. Millennials want easy buying decisions, and that’s it. They want one or two choices, so we train our staff to not over-complicate things.”

As a result, David tells his staff to develop their “top five” favorite plants for each category, such as sun and shade. “And that’s about three more options than 90 percent of our customers even need,” he says.”

In addition to industry nuggets of wisdom, the GCA Summer Tour has helped David develop a plan to implement more landscape services at the stores. Right now, they only offer delivery, design consultations, and tree and shrub installation. “It’s not a full-scale landscape operation,” he says. “We want to gear it toward that eventually, so I spent a lot of time picking the brains of the different managers and owners at the different garden centers we visited.”

David also found helpful ideas on how to cross-merchandise displays so that it breaks up the fixed rows of product. “There’s an area in our store that I’m drawing up plans for how we could make up some displays,” he says. “If I built some of these wooden benches and reused some we have, we could put product on these for the main seasons and displace them into other areas. We have to make sure we do that effectively without cutting down on sales due to less inventory square footage for certain categories.”



He finds that through his membership in GCA, he’s able to network with like-minded people who are willing to share information about their businesses, which helps him improve his.

Keep Changing & Taking Risks

As Co-Owner of Alsip Home & Nursery with his brother, Richard Christakes, David is not afraid to take chances if it means improving and streamlining the business. “You have to change and not be afraid to take some risks,” he says. “I think a lot of people have been a

little timid about that over the past 10 years. You have got to keep pushing. We've struck out on some things, and then we've done some great things."

David is never idle – he's always working on something. And he encourages his employees to do the same.

"I remember the first day I ever got paid by our company. I wrote a report to my dad [Bill Christakes] about our paintball area and ways we could improve it," David says. "And he said something to me that I still say to our staff today: 'Don't ever come to me with a problem unless you already have a suggested solution in your head.'"

He carries out that policy in his leadership today, empowering employees to think of their own solution and invest in their own success. "That empowers people, and they start coming up with solutions that you didn't even think of on your own. They're the best people to ask because they're the people doing it."



But with so many good ideas and a limited budget, sometimes good ideas get left on the drawing board. David has a constantly running list of tasks that he revisits and evaluates to make sure that the idea they pursue will be the most profitable. "Someone told me a long time ago that leadership and direction is picking the good ideas not to do," David says.

Working in the garden center operation has always been an opportunity for the Christakes family – Bill Christakes was a founding partner of the Frankfort location, which was established in 1969. He bought out the other owners by 1991, then opened up the St. John store in 1994. His sons, David and Richard, as well as another partner, own the business now. Bill still currently works in the growing facility.

David worked in all areas of the business before coming to a leadership position. After he came back from deployment with the Army, he worked full-time out of the St. John store. "I found I enjoyed the business considerably," he says. In 2009, he moved over to the Frankfort location.

His journey to Co-Owner has been filled with plenty of life and business lessons along the way. He recalls a vivid incident from 2009 with a landscaper that still reminds him to never run out of impatiens. "There's a difference between knowing something that you read in a book and knowing something that you have experienced in real life," says David.

He likes to create solutions – he built a tree display that kept them from toppling over, and it led to increased tree sales. "I like to create and build things, and I don't have anyone who can tell me that if I dream something up, I can't build it or that it's not in the budget," David says. "If it's not in the budget, we'll make a way. We can fight for things we want to do, and we can make them happen. To me, that's living the dream."