



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Sue Wisbey, President

Alpha Nursery & Garden Center, Cascade, ID

Alpha Nursery Becomes Customers' Steward For Their 'Gardening Adventures'



The words "Where your gardening adventure begins" greet customers as they pass by the Alpha Nursery & Garden Center sign in the store's entryway plantings. The Cascade, ID-based independent garden center and nursery is a counterpart to Owner Sue Wisbey's other business, Alpha Landscape and Property Maintenance. "They work hand-in-hand; they're sister businesses," she says. "We actually have landscape customers who shop in the nursery, then we have nursery customers who'll have landscaping work done."

Sue says Alpha Nursery, which she started in 2006, is there to help customers during every step of their gardening journey. "It's a lifetime of planting, growing and making things look good. We help them with that process."

Since its inception in 2000, Alpha Landscape's primary focus, boasting the tagline of "Beautifying outdoor living," has been to create luxurious spaces outside for people to enjoy the great outdoors. The company does just that, as Sue says 95 percent of her landscape clients are residential.

"It's my passion," Sue describes her work in the industry, which she happened to land upon by accident while working as an accounts receivable clerk for a fulfillment company. She dabbled in the industry with her own landscaping company for a few years, then left and took up a position for a local school.

When her coworkers caught wind of her green thumb, she was asked to complete odd landscaping jobs here and there. Soon, that encouraged her to quit her job and put her efforts into her new landscaping business full-time. Eventually, a retail nursery and garden center followed.



Since Alpha Nursery is located in a high-altitude mountainous region, the retailer has about seven months of selling, then shuts down for the other five months due to the frozen climate. To capitalize on those select months of season, Sue has found several ways to diversify her businesses with unique offerings that customers can't find from online retailers and national big box chains. "The diversification has helped us make it through the hard times and be ready for the good times."

The retailer has an exclusive trademarked brand of homemade organic fertilizer mix, called Alpha Tree Complex, which is very popular among customers. "We sell it in buckets," Sue says. "A lot of times, we'll ship it to Oregon, Washington, Montana and even down to California."

That same mix is incorporated into every plant that Alpha Nursery grows, which accounts for about 20 percent of the store's green goods inventory. "I had been searching for 26 years for the perfect ingredients," Sue says. "Everything we grow, everything we plant, has this fertilizer on it."



Every Wednesday during the summer months, Alpha Nursery hosts a farmers market, which always draws a large crowd, says Sue. Then, they plant a 100-percent organic vegetable garden every year in one of the high tunnels that customers can shop out of and pick their own produce any time the nursery is open.

Even her landscaping company has found ways to diversify – customers can rent a variety of landscaping equipment, from aerators to thatchers and log splitters. "We had these pieces of equipment just sitting here, so we started renting them out," Sue says. "It's one of those things where we've diversified, and we've made it a one-stop shop."

Sue makes it a point to attend industry trade shows and garden center tours to keep up on the trends and see how other stores are displaying their product. She attends four trade shows a year, including the summertime's IGC Show at Chicago's Navy Pier.

"I love attending the seminars and learning new things, because things are always changing," she says. "Getting fresh perspectives on the whole social media thing and the Millennial and Gen Z generations is so important. I'm learning how to adapt to meet their needs, so that we can capture that up-and-coming market."

The garden center tours have presented Sue with new ideas, and she points out that a lot of her business practices have stemmed from ideas garnered from the tours and other garden centers. She can always find new suppliers, products and technologies – both for the nursery and landscaping businesses – from the trade shows and tours.

“It’s invigorating, because you’re surrounded by your peer group that is full of people who have the same passion you do,” she says. “Our industry is very unique. Most of the people love plants and love what they’re doing.”

Being a member of Garden Centers of America (GCA) has proven to be just as helpful to Sue and her businesses. “I love the sharing and all the networking opportunities GCA presents. It has a huge education component and keeps me updated on what’s going on in the industry. It presents us retailers with a guideline to follow, so you’re not just grasping at straws.”



The Adventure Continues

In an effort to be customers’ one-stop source for all their gardening and landscaping needs, Alpha Nursery carries a wide range of hardgoods, green goods, flag stone, pavers, pond supplies and more. The nursery grows and sources in a lot of unique varieties of trees, shrubs and perennials, offering a selection that customers can’t find anywhere else. Recognizable brands, such as Proven Winners, Rock Stars, STEPABLES and more, are also in stock.

Alpha Nursery offers a custom container program, where the retailer plants up the pots, holds them until the weather is ready in spring then delivers them to customers’ houses. “We’ve actually got several requests this year to do more next year,” Sue says. All of the retailer’s hanging baskets are planted in-house.



Annuals and perennials continue to be the store’s bestsellers during the spring. In late summer and fall, trees and shrubs garner the most sales. Sue says her Alpha Tree Complex is right up there in popularity, since she sells it with everything.

Customers can find Alpha Nursery’s selection of green goods and hardgoods on the store’s website, and soon, they will be able to place online orders. Sue says that 90 percent of the store’s plant inventory has been uploaded to the site.

While they’re waiting for this feature to be complete, Alpha Nursery allows customers to call and place an order over the phone. Orders have already been placed from and shipped to states across the country, including New York, Virginia, Utah and California.

Accessibility of products and a quality selection aren’t the only ways that Alpha Nursery sets itself

apart – Sue makes sure there are plenty of fun in-store experience-builders in place to make each shopping trip a memorable one.

Exceptional customer service is at the top of the list – each and every employee is trained to go out and greet the customer. Sue encourages her staff to create personal connections with customers to make them feel at ease. “Ninety-nine percent of our customers are very happy when they leave here,” she says. “We have five-star ratings on Facebook.”

Keeping young families top-of-mind, Sue is installing a kids’ recreation area complete with a sandbox and playground, so children can play and stay engrossed while mom or dad shops in the garden center.

Customers are entertained with unique and quirky merchandise displays. Sue loves to repurpose every day items, such as toilets and trunks, for creative vignettes. One trunk is the home to a miniature garden, while a toilet overflows with flowers and foliage. A sign with “No dumping allowed” printed on it adds a touch of humor.



A display garden was planted along the store’s fence-line to showcase all the different plants offered, presenting staff with a great selling tool. “A little plant in a 4-inch pot will never show its true glory until you actually get it into the ground,” Sue says. “Customers will spot plants in the garden and say, ‘Ah, I gotta have one of those!’”