



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile Gretchen Willey-Gill, Manager/Buyer Willey Farms, Townsend, DE

Abundant Offerings in Home, Garden & Food Make Willey Farms A True 'One-Stop Shop'

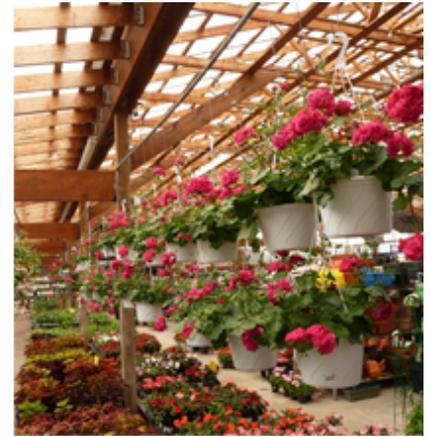


Willey Farms in Townsend, DE, is the definition of a “one-stop shop” – the family-owned and operated business consists of a garden center, nursery, bakery, deli, produce and gourmet foods market, naturals and organics departments, candy shop and home accents center all on one property. Blending all these departments together provides a constant flow of foot traffic year-round.

“It’s a benefit to the garden center, because during the middle of summer when people aren’t really thinking of garden center items, they’re still coming in for groceries and other specialties,” says Gretchen Willey-Gill, second-generation management whose roles include Manager and Buyer at her family’s business.

Out of all the departments that Willey Farms encompasses, produce is their No. 1 division. “Everyone needs to eat – it makes sense,” she admits. But it comes as no surprise, since the store’s produce market sells seasonal fruits and vegetables from local farmers, as well as unique produce from around the world. Customers can even find a selection of organic produce, and premade produce gift baskets.

Gretchen makes sure to stock the market with as many varieties of fruits and vegetables as possible. They’ll grow and stock unique varieties that aren’t usually commercially grown just to give their customers plenty of options to choose from.



Noting Willey Farms' outstanding deli selection, the blog *Best Things Delaware* selected it as the sixth "Best Deli in Delaware" out of 10 in the entire state. The blog also mentioned that the store has the biggest selection of natural and organic foods in the area.

The deli is fully equipped with around 100 different options of lunch meats and cheeses, as well as made-to-order subs and sandwiches. They serve a selection of hot lunches that are ready-to-go from the hot bar, and the in-store eatery gives customers a moment to rest and enjoy their meal before completing their shopping journey. A full menu of gourmet take-and-bake dinners is prepared on-site daily, including soups, salads and chicken parmesan.



"We're really famous for our chicken pot pies and mac 'n cheese," Gretchen says.

The bakery is stocked full with treats that are baked fresh daily in-house, as well as goods from local and Amish bakeries. The list of treats includes breads, pies, cookies, donuts, muffins, brownies and more.

The gourmet department, filled with coffees, teas, marinades, sauces, dips, honey, jams, preserves and more, is every "foodie's" dream. There's even a section of old-fashioned candy to keep kids – and the young at heart – occupied. Willey Farms has started carrying vitamins, supplements, diapers and toilet paper, which further cements their standing in the community as a one-stop shop.

With so many departments to buy for, Gretchen attends the premier industry garden center tours and shows, such as the GCA Summer Tour and the IGC Show in Chicago, to ensure she's seeing the very best of the best in home and garden products. While on the Virginia tour last



year, Gretchen and her cousin Joey found “tons and tons of ideas.”

“Every stop we visited, our eyes got giant – we saw so much!” she says. “We both have cameras full of pictures.” Each garden center – large and small – gave them great ideas that they hadn’t thought about doing, but would love to put into action in some way at Willey Farms.

But it wasn’t just the retail stores that inspired Gretchen – the connections she made with other members were just as enlightening. “We met a lot of really nice people with a lot of good ideas,” she says.

Beyond the garden center tours and networking, being a member in GCA keeps Gretchen in sync with the latest gardening trends and industry news. “I love reading the monthly *GCA Member E-Newsletter* and *Garden Retail Trends Report*,” she says. “I pass it around to our staff, because different departments are inspired by different items.”

‘Willey Farms Is Another Sibling’

As a second-generation retailer, growing and selling produce runs in Gretchen’s blood – both her grandfather and father both owned and tended produce farms. But the Willey family didn’t start selling their homegrown produce until 1975, when their harvest was so bountiful that they still had leftovers even after freezing, canning or eating what they could – thus, laying the foundation for what would eventually become Willey Farms.



Gretchen’s father, Donald Willey, would sell the extra produce to farm markets, but when he wasn’t getting the prices he knew the harvest was worth, he set up his own stand at the end of the family’s driveway. His six young children, along with several nieces, nephews and other family members, worked for him during the summer, tending the fields and manning the stand. “It kept us busy all summer,” she says.

As the years went on, the business expanded rapidly, adding more buildings and departments to its ever-growing list of offerings. Now, although the business is in the same location as when Donald started selling produce, the second-generation of family leadership is at the helm to grow the business even further with unique items and experiences that customers can’t find anywhere else.



“For me, Willey Farms is another sibling,” Gretchen says. “Sometimes it’s irritating, but you know all of its nitty-gritty secrets, and I love it. I take care of it no matter what.”

In an effort to deliver an incredible experience to each and every customer, Willey Farms set up a sampling station for shoppers to taste a variety of produce, cheeses, sauces, chips, nuts, cookies and more before they make a purchase.

The store’s department layouts shift frequently throughout the year, allowing adaptability per stock and season. This

“ebb and flow” of departments creates a new experience for customers each time they set foot in the store.

Merchandise displays blend departments, too. The store’s merchandisers will regularly pull product from multiple departments, showcasing supplies with plants, decor, pottery and fertilizer in one display. Gretchen says, “It’s a complete story.”

As Willey Farms strides through its fourth decade in business, the retailer’s story continues to unfold as the second-generation of the family adapts the business to meet consumers’ evolving needs in this era’s changing retail landscape.