



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

**Stephen Barlow, President of Operations/General Manager
Barlow's Flower Farm, Sea Girt, NJ**

Barlow Family Creates Lasting Personal Connections with Customers



About a mile and a half from the Atlantic Ocean lies a historic family farm and retail garden center that is well-known along the Jersey Shore for all types of gardening and landscaping needs - Barlow's Flower Farm in Sea Girt, NJ. Growing up in his parents' business, Stephen Barlow, President of Operations/General Manager, always knew he wanted to be involved.

"I didn't have a choice. It wasn't a question," he jokes. "From the age of 10, I started helping out - anywhere from carrying plants to customers' cars to making boxes to helping run the soil machine. Eventually, I had my

own 1/2 acre cut flower garden that I would grow and sell in the store."

A lot has changed since then, including Stephen's expanded role in the company, as his parents Leslie and Steve Barlow, step back from ownership - although they still assist with decision-making from time-to-time and maintain other roles instrumental to the business.

"Stephen relies on Steve for some growing advice because he's been a grower for a long time," Leslie, Buyer/Customer Engagement/Designer, says. "He uses old-fashioned growing methods that really work - they're 'secrets of the industry' since they're not used anymore. With Stephen's knowledge and Steve's advice, they produce a really good crop."



Leslie purchases all of the pottery, artificial flowers and home decor for the store, as well as designs containers for customers and the store. "I also work in customer service," Leslie says. "My favorite thing actually is working with customers - I love it!"

She is responsible for attending industry garden center tours to help better their business, including the GCA Summer Tours.

“I call myself a ‘tour groupie,’” Leslie jokes. “I really do enjoy the GCA Summer Tours because of the camaraderie with everyone on the bus. People give very constructive criticism. This is a fantastic industry - everyone wants to help everybody. Every stop really goes out of their way to make sure their store is as perfect as can be. They treat us so well, and the vendors who sponsor it are really wonderful to converse with.”



Every garden center is unique, she says, and you always find an idea from every store. Stephen agrees, “You always find something - whether it be on signage, pricing structure, how they integrate their landscape business with their garden center, how they bundle and price different services - they’re all very valuable ideas.”

Stephen says they also examine how other garden centers set up their displays and how they get rid of dead spots. Store flow and curb appeal are key areas they look out for, too.

After returning from the tours, Leslie shares with the staff photos of displays and new products that they want to incorporate into the store. Barlow’s distributes an in-house flyer every week to keep employees abreast of store news and new products or plants coming into stock.

This proliferation of information has allowed the Barlows to see what exactly is needed in order to differentiate their store from the competition - shoppable, appealing displays of quality products presented in organized, clean facilities.

Leslie credits Garden Centers of America with organizing and distributing helpful information that’s beneficial to independent garden centers, whether it be through the organization’s monthly e-newsletters or the tours.



“Let’s face it, we’re in the midst of a massive amount of big box stores that are getting better all the time,” she says. “We need to be a step above them in order to survive. We do not have the advertising dollars that they have. Most of us can’t print a big, beautiful magazine like Lowes can. We really have to stick together to see what’s working or what isn’t, and how we can help each other. I think GCA does that.”

Establishing Personal Connections

Barlow’s, which is open year-round, aside for a few days in the beginning of the year to clean their facilities, creates a warm, welcoming environment for their customers, who usually come from the densely populated 5- to 10-mile radius around the store. The family history of Barlow’s fosters a personal connection with shoppers.

“Customers feel a personal connection to our family and our business,” Stephen says. “And when you think about it, how many family businesses are really out there? For the most part, the market is flooded with mass retailers where the customer is not going to feel that connection.”

The next generation in the Barlow family has started helping out and showing interest in gardening. Stephen has twin 6-year-old boys and a 20-month-old baby who like to “work” with their father. Stephen’s sister Stephanie’s children also come in to work on the busy days. Leslie says, “The customers love seeing the family.”



Stephen’s children will occasionally assist him with filming the short educational gardening videos for the store’s YouTube channel, Barlow’s TV, where he gives gardeners who live in the shore town local tips on what they can do in their outdoor spaces.

“We’ve gotten a really good response on the videos,” Stephen says.

“Customers come in all the time asking about the videos and when the next one is going to be available. They love watching them. They love the fact that they’re organic and original. We’ve gotten up to 1,000 views on some of the videos.”

Stephen has gotten the filming, editing and marketing process for the videos down to a science. He films the videos on his iPad and edits them using the iMovie application, making sure to keep the length of the video between two and three minutes. The short clips are then broadcasted on Barlow’s Facebook page, YouTube channel, website and e-mail communications to customers.

“My goal for 2016 is to put out three videos a month - maybe more,” Stephen says.

Barlow’s Dirty Glove Club is another driving force for creating a connection with customers, honoring the most loyal shoppers. Customers pay a yearly fee of \$40 (before March 1) or \$45 (after that) for a Dirty Glove Club membership t-shirt and card, which grant them 15 percent off non-sale items, exclusive discounts on Barlow’s events and other promotional discounts throughout the year.



“We started with around 300-400 members 12 years ago, and now we’re up to 2,000 members,” Stephen says. “These members account for 33 percent of our sales. Selling those shirts creates a nice cash flow, especially during the slower times. Plus, it creates that sense of loyalty when the customers know they’ll receive 15 percent off here. They’ll shop here instead of the garden center down the street.”

Barlow’s is heavily involved in their community by supporting almost every fundraiser or charity group that stops by, deepening that personal connection with customers and showing that the Barlows care about the people in their community.

“Our big focus is the local food bank,” Leslie says. “We host food drives here or we take up collections at chamber of commerce functions. We started hosting early morning yoga classes in February, and half of the proceeds go toward the food bank.”



A Land Steeped in History

The property on which Barlow’s is established is rich in agricultural history. “It was a vegetable producing farm

before my parents purchased it in 1983,” Stephen says. “Before we owned it, the farm grew tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplants, sweet corn and more. They originally leased 300 acres, but that land got bought up by developers as property values rose.”

There have been three families to own the property: The Newberries, the Swains and now, the Barlows.

“The gentleman who owned the farm before us was a mentor to my husband, Steve,” Leslie says. “The Swains did not want to sell their property to a housing developer, so they approached us to see if we wanted to buy it. They made it possible for us.”

When the Barlows first purchased the farm, the land consisted of a 1807 farmhouse, one retail greenhouse, 10 small growing greenhouses, a retail shop and a garage for production. As the years passed and sales grew, existing facilities were moved and remodeled, and new production houses were erected.

Renovations in 2004 allowed the Barlows to replace the original retail greenhouses with a 10,000-square-foot European glass greenhouse. The total number of growing greenhouses increased to 28 and outdoor growing space now covered 1.5 acres. And Barlow’s keeps growing.



“We’re in the process of buying a 22-acre farm about 5 miles from our retail location,” Stephen says. “We have the luxury of growing 60-70 percent of our plants, and we’re increasing the amount of product we grow to break into the wholesale landscape industry.”