



## Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

### GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

**Karen Andersen-Thatcher, CFO / Vice President of Human Relations  
Walter Andersen Nursery, San Diego / Poway, CA**

### Walter Andersen Nursery Stresses 'Shop Local' to Rise Above Competitors



Since 1928, when Walter Andersen Sr. started his business, Walter Andersen Nursery, the independent garden center has been recognized as the premier gardening authority with the finest plant material in the San Diego, CA, area.

Now, with the third generation of the Andersen family at the helm and a second store location in Poway, CA, Walter Andersen Nursery continues to deliver the gardening needs that the community wants – all while stressing the importance of shopping local.

Walter Andersen Jr., the second generation, still helps out with the business as its Chairman, but his children, Ken Andersen, President / CEO of Nursery Operations, and Karen Andersen-Thatcher, CFO / Vice President of Human Resources, (pictured above, right), mainly operate the business.

"I was born into this industry," Karen says. "But I was off doing other things – I worked in real estate, then I worked in the travel and tourism industry. I loved that job, but it required a lot of traveling, which was difficult when I was starting my family."

More than 20 years ago now, Karen got the call to come back to the family business, because they were going to open a second location in Poway, and they needed all hands on deck.



"They asked me to come back, and I did," she says. "It was a great decision."

While attending the GCA Summer Tour in Portland this year, Karen spotted several ideas that she thought could help her family's business better serve the local clientele.

"I feel like the customers in Portland have a lot in common with our customers, so the stops had a lot of product lines and some different merchandise that I hadn't seen that we're actually researching and thinking about bringing in," she says.

She also took away new ways to merchandise and display product, as well as ideas to freshen up the store. "When you see the same thing every day, you kind of get stuck in it, so it's nice to go outside your store and find something different."



Karen feels, as a member of GCA, she has the opportunity to talk and share with other indie garden centers. "I like the fact that we're all in this together," she says. "It is hard to fight the big box stores. Since we stick together, it gives us a voice – it gives us somebody to bounce ideas off of and share concerns with. We're all going through the same thing. I think it's important that we stay together as a group to combat that big box mentality."



Karen explains that a Home Depot is just right down the street from their San Diego location, which has been frustrating for them, especially since the retail giant likes to compare themselves to the indie garden retailer. "On any given day, you can walk into that Home Depot, and they'll have a sign that says, 'Compare our price to Walter Andersen's.'"

Despite being overshadowed on price, Walter Andersen Nursery finds that the best way to set the brand apart is to focus on the fact that they are a locally-owned, family-operated organization that offers a large selection of organics, edibles, and native and drought-tolerant plants, which happen to be the store's bestsellers.

"Almost all of our plant material comes from suppliers who are located within 15 miles of our store," Karen says. "It's Southern California, there are greenhouses and growers all over."

Karen says their customers are really into knowing where their food comes from. "A lot of our customers grow their own food, and that category has been a big surge for us."

The retailer works with a grower that has allowed them to develop their own labeled pot for bedding plants and herbs. "We tell the grower what we want, and they grow it specifically for us in our pots."

These grow-your-own and organic-only movements have been key to attracting more Millennial foot traffic to the stores.

"Millennials seem to be much more conscious of buying organic, non-



GMO and things of that nature, so we make sure we have those products on the shelves for them," Karen says. "Quite honestly, where we are home gardening is a big thing, so we naturally see a lot of Millennials coming in and doing it on their own."



