



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Sandi Hillermann McDonald, President

Hillermann Nursery & Florist, Washington, MO

Heavy Focus on Community Relationships Drives Hillermann Nursery Toward Success



More than six decades ago, Hillermann Nursery & Florist blossomed out of Don Hillermann's interest in selling plants. Now, the community-oriented retailer has diversified its offerings over the years to include a retail garden center, nursery, florist and gift shop, landscape and lawn maintenance services, lighting and irrigation design/installation, snow removal, lawn and garden equipment sales and service and more - all while remaining a major presence in the Washington, MO area.

"We are very community-oriented," President Sandi Hillermann McDonald says. "We're involved with a lot of community events, such as school dinner auctions, county fairs, church events and everything in between. We try to have a presence at all these events, setting up a booth or children's activities there."

Establishing relationships with business leaders and members of the Washington community, Sandi served on several of the area's councils and boards, including the Chamber of Commerce, which has committees that she is still actively involved with.

Sandi has been the president of numerous state and national nursery industry associations, including Garden Centers of America. Her father, Bernie Hillermann, even served as GCA president in the mid 90s.



"We purposely go on the GCA Summer Tours and attend industry trade shows to stay connected and on top of trends, regulations and education," Sandi says. "I love the webinar format available online today, where you can jump on the Internet and catch webinars from different associations and trade magazines, keeping us all on our toes."

Hillermann Nursery has been a member of GCA for a very long time, Sandi says, and they've attended almost a decade worth of GCA Summer Tours.

"The GCA Summer Tours are so motivational to me," Sandi says. "I took a lot of photos and got a lot of ideas from the Portland tour."

Presenting another benefit of the GCA Summer Tour, networking opportunities allowed her to connect with fellow IGC retailers on the bus, and she picked up a new lead on insurance. Sandi says the tours are not only great for seeing fun, pretty displays, but also finding new business tips.

"It's a very well-rounded opportunity," she says, "and actually I've been transferring photos and information with several places and people whom I met on the bus. We've been e-mailing back and forth asking questions. Networking is very, very beneficial."



Sandi notes the camaraderie is a huge part of GCA. "It's all about the relationships," she says. "This industry feels more like family when you get together and see each other."

Master of Diversification

Hillermann Nursery - which is open year-round every day, except for Sundays in January, February and the first part of March - has something for everyone.

For the artists, the separately-leased Pot Shop gets their hands dirty throwing a bowl, a coffee cup or a fixture for their home. Sandi says the potter who owns the Pot Shop hosts classes, parties and more inside the garden center in 600 to 700 square feet of space. "She makes all of our miniature fairy houses and some of the little accessories for our fairy gardens."



For the sustainable-minded homeowners, beekeeping accessories set them up for success in maintaining a habitat for these pollinators. The store also increased the native and pollinator-feeding plant selections to bring awareness to the importance of birds, bees and butterflies.

For the cocktail enthusiast, locally-made beers and wines give them a taste of what the area has to offer. And for those who want to try their hand at crafting their own brews and wines, Hillermann has supplies in a special section of the store just for that.

"We've become very, very diversified because of the size of our community," Sandi says.

Hillermann entertains customers with its outdoor seasonal eatery, the Monarch Cafe, which is open on weekends, and an outdoor kitchen that gives the customer an "outdoor living experience."

"Our store is known for experiences and relationships," Sandi says. But the experiences don't stop there.

Hillermann Nursery's ensemble of animal residents includes chickens, dogs, birds, turtles and in the fall, miniature goats. For children, especially, there's an outdoor playground and a potting bench in the greenhouse for them to pot a plant in a container - free of charge. Kids have a special club devoted to them, bringing them into the store every first Saturday of the month for an activity.

"Every month, we host a 'make-and-take' type of activity for the kids," Sandi says. "The majority of the time the activities are free, or sometimes we'll charge \$5."



Groups of elementary school students tour the store regularly, and the retailer is actively involved in the community youth scene through YMCA projects and events.

Last year, Hillermann Nursery hosted the first Taste of Franklin County, bringing in more than a dozen food vendors, wineries and brewmasters to benefit the Foundation of Franklin County. "We host a lot of these types of events," Sandi says. "We organize a ladies night out event, customer appreciation holiday party and more. We try to stay very eventful, and very busy within the community."



To spread the word on promotions and events, the retailer advertises on social media, such as Facebook, on the local radio stations and in the town's local newspaper. A weekly newsletter and direct mail pieces to Hillermann Nursery's garden club reward members also keep customers up-to-date.

A Very Profitable Hobby

Founded by Sandi's uncle, Don Hillermann, in spring 1951, Hillermann Nursery started out as a hobby. Don sold plants on the side while maintaining a full-time job in a factory.

Two years later, Don's brother, Bernie, joined the business. A year later, both men left their factory positions and became full-time nurserymen.



"They went right into selling trees, shrubs and flowers," Sandi says. "From there grew the floral shop."

Hillermann Nursery still grows some of its nursery stock, though not as much as it used to. Annuals, perennials and plants for the retailer's combination hanging baskets and container gardens are grown in the production greenhouses on-site, mainly for quality assurance.

Growing up, Sandi knew she always wanted to carry on her family's business. "I've never worked outside of the company," Sandi says. "I literally grew up here, so I've worked in every facet of the company. My school was close to home, so I spent many, many hours here."

Through years and years of hands-on training and being entrenched in her family's business, Sandi carries on a culture at Hillermann Nursery that establishes - and celebrates the importance of - relationships with consumers in the Washington community.