

A man with long dark hair, wearing a red polo shirt with a logo, is smiling in a greenhouse filled with various plants. The background shows rows of potted plants on shelves.

cover  
story

# Fairfield Garden Center Award-Winning Dedication

Building knowledge through networking helped this year's ANLA Retail Rising Star, Frank Fernicola Jr., bring new ideas to Fairfield Garden Center.



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For a second or third generation retailer in any business, it's easy to fall into old habits, maintaining the operation just as it's been run for decades and doing things the way they've always been done, simply because that's the way they've always been done. It takes a certain kind of person to step up, examine the business and find ways to expand his knowledge to help grow and improve the operation. The American Nursery & Landscape Association (ANLA) recognizes that's not always an easy task. That's one of the reasons it created the Retail Rising Star award – to recognize young individuals who are

making significant contributions, not only to their garden centers, but to the industry as a whole. This year's winner is Frank Fernicola Jr.,

co-owner/manager at Fairfield Garden Center in Fairfield, N.J.

## A History Of Growth

Before Frank Jr.'s father, Frank, and Uncle Silvio opened Fairfield Garden Center in 1967, Silvio and Frank Sr.'s father Vincent operated a highway fruit stand a couple miles away.

They decided to purchase the garden center's current 5-acre property to expand into lawn and garden, just as that trend was beginning to grow. Initially, everything was housed in one building – Fairfield Home and Garden Center – until a new garden shop was built across the parking lot to house all the lawn and garden items. Barbecues, furniture and Christmas product remained in the original building. Now the operation includes some newer Nexus structures for addi-

tional covered shopping.

"That was a big improvement over what was originally there, which was just an older shade structure," says Frank. "It has enabled everything to be kept better and more shoppable, even in rainy conditions."

Annuals and perennials make up a large part of Fairfield's sales, and the nursery comprises the largest part of the outdoor selling area. "We have all your basic items, but we also try to get a lot of the unusual plants in – different evergreens that you don't see everywhere, or Japanese maples – specializing in slightly different varieties," Frank says.

Fairfield also has a large water gardening department, which has grown significantly in recent years.

### Keeping Current

Frank says keeping up with changing retail trends has been one of the biggest challenges the garden center has faced. "It's even harder for small businesses," he says. "We don't have the budget of a Target or IKEA to achieve it in. We need to take little steps to keep things current. Adding the covered shopping, having a cleaner restroom area and more efficient checkouts and adding our POS system all adds to that." He also notes that his father, Frank Sr., and cousin, Jim, also co-owner, have both been very supportive of different ideas and changes for the garden center, which has helped bring it to a new level.

One key update was paving the entire nursery yard with paver blocks, which Frank says is a big improvement over the muddy aisles and sloppy pathways that used to be there. "It really gives a whole lot of added value to the product," he says. Paving the aisles also made them accessible by shopping carts, which alleviated a lot of burden on the employees who used to have to pull plants out of beds for customers. The nursery is now more self service, which has freed up employees to help customers who might be looking for specific knowledge.

### Connecting With Customers

To deal with box store competition, Fairfield also offers a "We Plan, You Plant" service to its customers. Shoppers can either bring in a photo or e-mail one ahead of time, along with rough measurements of the yard. "We walk around with them and sketch on the pictures, make notes for the customer and then do a quick draw-

ing right on the spot and help them pull the plants out and get them going," says Frank. "I don't think they can get that kind of attention at the box stores."

Another unique offering is Fairfield's large Halloween program, which includes a haunted house and carnival rides and draws a large number of people each year. Frank says the addition of the Halloween department has been one of the garden center's greatest successes, and it's growing more and more every year.



## Satisfaction Guaranteed

Fairfield Garden Center offers a two year guarantee on trees and shrubs, an idea Frank Fernicola Jr. got from talking with a fellow garden center retailer. Since implementing the guarantee last year, tie-in sales of soil amendments have increased 35 percent, and plant starter fertilizer sales

have increased 40 percent at Fairfield. The guarantee is promoted with in-store signage and brochures, as well as tags on the shrubs that explain the plant insurance. Fernicola says the garden center will promote the guarantee more in the coming year with the hopes of increasing margins even further.

"We figured that after two years we'd have a very minimal number of returns, especially if we're starting the customers out with the right products to get that plant going and then educating them," he says. "And if that customer does return a plant to you within two years, and they remember where they got it and saved their receipt, then they're a good customer. They're coming back to your store with a dead plant, so there's your chance to make it right, educate them and sell more product."

Fairfield has also started offering educational classes covering everything from water gardening to hydrangeas, which help draw customers, as well.

### The Power Of Networking

Frank says a lot of his marketing and promotional ideas come from networking. He attributes much of his industry involvement to two friends, Bob Heitzman from Mitchell's and Jeff Warschauer from Nexus Corp., both of whom introduced him to ANLA. Since then he's become an active ANLA member and has participated

the gaps where my business knowledge is deficient. Just getting involved and seeing the industry from a larger perspective has helped me tremendously."

That's exactly the kind of attitude that made Frank stand out as a candidate for the Retail Rising Star award, according to Joe Stoffregen, president of the ANLA retail division board, which is responsible for choosing the Rising Star.

"Frank is coming into a family business that he's been working in since he was a kid, but he's young, energetic and has sought to take his business to the next level," says Stoffregen. "He has a real inquisitiveness to the how and the why. I think there's really something to be learned from that for other folks coming up in a family business. He wasn't just content to sit back. He really positioned himself to say, 'I'm going to add something to this business, and I'm going to seek to improve myself and make myself more valuable in my own family business.' He engages people, he gets involved in discussions, and it's just those kinds of things he did to stand out – not just a lot of ANLA involvement, but the whole attitude he's brought to the environment he's in." TGC

## Fairfield Garden Center

**Owners:** Jim Fernicola, Frank Fernicola Sr. and Frank Fernicola Jr.

**Location:** Fairfield, N.J.

**Established:** 1967

**Size:** 5 acres

**Web site:** [www.fairfieldgardencenter.com](http://www.fairfieldgardencenter.com)