



Customers can wait for orders or their shopping partners in one of several comfy seating areas.

A DAY AT THE GARDEN SPA

BY PAM BUDDY-D'AMBROSIO

IF A GARDEN CENTER COULD BE A SPA, MARIANI GARDENS IN ARMONK, NEW YORK, WOULD BE BOOKING APPOINTMENTS FOR FACIALS.



Upon passing through the doors of Mariani Gardens, you know immediately your senses are being given a treat. Your eyes are showered with colors: teal, charreuse, forest green, cobalt blue and burnt orange. Next comes the comforting smells from the 1,000 sq. ft. café: crepe Suzette, Greek omelet with baby spinach and feta cheese, broiled wild salmon panini, grilled shrimp salad with lemon-lime vinaigrette, coffee, tea and fruit smoothies. Then there's the meditative music with its mélange of flutes, pipes, harps, triangles, piano and wind through fallen leaves. You realize that the sound of cascading water comes from somewhere other than the sound system—it comes from the double-sided water wall that separates the retail

area from the greenhouse. The indulgences aren't complete without the textures: warm wood, cool ceramic, silky wax and rigid metal.

Although you are buoyed by tranquility of this place, it's time to focus on the task—you've come to the garden center for ... food!

Take a seat if you can get one, for even in January when there are no thoughts of planting, there's a line of people waiting to partake of the menu, which changes daily. On one mid-autumn day the café's delectable offerings were grilled figs with toasted walnuts, Asian pear salad, rubbed beef tenderloin panini and French toast with berries.

Mariani Gardens, which opened in April 2007, is a climate-controlled Nexus structure with air conditioning and radiant heat throughout the store and greenhouses. The retail area offers items hand picked from around the world by director, vice president Bruce Tilley. Among the items are intricately designed and painted plates,



The gift and décor items at Mariani Gardens are hand picked from around the world and set up in gorgeous displays.



The 1,000 sq. ft. café offers visitors a peaceful locale in which to connect with friends over a gourmet lunch. It could be the hottest spot in town!

bowls, candlestick holders, frames, silverware, stoneware and turned wood. The displays change weekly, arranged by the sales staff who have design and retail backgrounds. Bruce turns over the entire store four to five times a year by changing paint colors and adding new elements. A floral department is situated in the back of the store with coolers for the extensive flower selection. A seating area with a television is opposite the floral department, for customers' other halves who can't miss the big game. The workhorses of the garden—fertilizer, deer repellent and hoses—are housed in an adjoining room in the back of the store during the off-season.

Nursery items are arranged in winding paths, not rows, to artistically display the shrubs and trees and to demonstrate to customers how they might landscape their yards. Mariani's specialty is large trees such as European beech, eleven-foot boxwoods and palm trees. The retailer even offers its customers winter storage for their palm trees in one of Mariani's greenhouses, or off-site storage for the larger palms.

Sam Walsh, general manager, travels throughout the country for



Mariani Gardens' Nexus retail structure opened its doors in 2007.



Is that someone watering nearby? No, it's the water cascading down this stone wall, creating soothing sounds and a visual delight.

Mariani's. He looks for trees that he knows will set them apart from the others. "Have I seen this anywhere else? Is it rare and unusual?" he asks on his search for specimens. He finds it, and he sells it, too. Sam recently sold a stunning apple tree arch that has been hand-trained for 22 years.

Word-of-mouth advertising is what brings customers to Mariani Gardens from the New York metro area and well beyond. Mariani's has shipped their trees to Los Angeles, Virginia and even to an island via helicopter.

After your meal and the tour through this alternate universe of garden center as respite, where nothing matters but the meandering, your limbs are wobbly as they would be after a deep-tissue massage. As you walk across the spacious parking lot toward your car, you fumble for your cell phone to tell your friends about this place. They just might need a gardeners' vegetarian omelet along with a wedding gift, cut flowers and grass seed, and you're happy to join them. **GP**

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