

cover
story

Fresh Start

Atlantic Garden Center's new owners put their own spin on the family business.

Atlantic Garden Center

Owners: Christian & Sarah Dulina

Location: Virginia Beach, Va.

Size: 2 acres

Annual Sales: \$2.5 million

Web site: www.atlanticgardencenter.com

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Sometimes, a fresh perspective is all it takes to make a good garden center even better.

That's exactly what's happening these days at Atlantic Garden Center. Jim and Jane Crowell started the business in 1991, and over the years built it into a very successful two-location garden retail and growing operation. But with a next generation of family waiting in the wings and ready to run their own business, the Crowells decided the time was right to make a change.

Their daughter Sarah Dulina and her husband Christian bought the 2-acre facility in the Great Neck area of Virginia Beach, Va., last January and quickly put their own stamp on the operation.

A New Approach To People

The Dulinas had a good idea of what they were getting with the garden center. Sarah grew up in the family business, eventually getting a finance degree and

servicing as company CFO. Christian, on the other hand, had some managerial experience but no real horticulture background when he married Sarah and joined the company. He started at ground level, learning the business while working his way up over time from the landscape crew to general manager.

But even with their years of experience, they were quick to dispense with the "That's the way we've always done it" mindset. The Dulinas rethought their approach to every piece of the business, from their customers, staff and products, down to the garden center itself.

The first step was rededicating Atlantic Garden Center to making the customer the No. 1 priority. "It's something we share with all of our employees almost on a daily basis. The customer is the one bringing you your paycheck," Sarah says. They understand that, and they've bought into it." She is confident her staff will treat every customer the same, whether they're spending \$500 on trees and shrubs, or insisting on a slightly dif-

ferent shade of green in a \$7 self-watering African violet pot.

"It may not be a huge sale. But the next time that guy landscapes his bed, he's going to come here instead of going to Home Depot because we're going to wait on him hand and foot," she says.

The key, they believe, is giving employees the freedom to make good decisions and do whatever is necessary to make the customer happy. For this to work, however, you need an experienced staff you can really trust. This is possible at Atlantic Garden Center because of another adjustment this year: reworking the payroll structure. In the past, the expense of four family members in management – as well as carrying the cost of the company's growing operation – made it nearly impossible to keep more than the core employees past early summer.

With the change in ownership, they made the decision to keep almost their entire staff year round. The benefits are obvious: less training in the spring, a more efficient and effective staff and a better shopping experience for customers.

It also allows for more hands on deck to get things done around the place when things slow down in the summer and fall (See the sidebar 'Employee Ideas').

Mixing Things Up

The fresh start applies to their inventory, too. "Our product mix is a little different now," Christian says. "We want to redefine what we offer. I've gone out this year and





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tried to get different stuff, to be as different as we can from the box stores. We're carrying a lot of varieties they don't carry."

Smaller, more frequent orders of plant material from fewer vendors are replacing the big truckloads of the past, too. "Three, four, five years ago, we'd get huge \$10,000 trucks. We'd have to keep all the stuff somewhere and keep it looking good. It always kind of backfired on us," he says. "And we were buying from so many different people it just got really confusing. My philosophy has been to narrow it down to five vendors we split almost equally across the board. And we buy local product as much as possible."

Experimenting with product selection doesn't have to require large scale gambles, Sarah says. "The person who orders in the greenhouse saw a fuchsia tree she really liked and said, 'Oh my gosh, I would love to order one sample of this.' It was going to retail for \$69 and it's something we have never ordered in the past. I told her to get three. It's not that big a deal if it doesn't work."

The staff made a big fuchsia display as a backdrop and they sold all three trees within a week. "We reordered fuchsia trees three or four times," Sarah says. "I think playing with the product mix, trying one or two fun and exciting things

helps bring people back on a weekly basis to see what's new. And you don't have to spend a lot of money doing it."

Freshening Up The Facilities

The facility itself is changing, too. Rethinking their advertising spend freed up funds to improve the company's signage, for example.

"We used to spend a lot of money on advertising in the paper and never really saw the return on that," Christian says. This year, they restructured the marketing budget – saving around \$50,000 in the spring – and put a chunk of that money toward in-house signage.

"We invested \$10,000 of the savings in a banner machine," he says. "Sarah's brother, Brent, does all of our in-house marketing. He creates any banner we want within a couple of days."

The colorful new signage makes a world of difference for the simple, 18-year-old-hoop house with 8-foot gutters. "We have a lot of really nice banners on the outside and throughout the store to spruce it up," he says.

Bigger changes are coming as well. "Our building is kind of primitive. It's basically nine hoop houses connected front to back, and there's no air conditioning. We installed roof vents, but it's still miserable in the heat of summer," Christian says.

The Dulinas plan to work with Nexus to remodel the first four bays, about 10,000 square feet housing the cashier area, gift shop and hard goods lines. "Our sales dip drastically June through September due to the heat. If we can get an air conditioned building where people are comfortable and get those sales back up it will be a worthy investment," Sarah says.

All the changes, from people to product to facilities, seem to be adding up – both

for customers and on the bottom line.

"We have a lot of new customers, and others who are coming in who hadn't been here in years," Sarah says.

"We were up in April. That was actually the first month we had been up in sales in 13 months," Christian says. "We broke even in May, even with a huge storm that sat off the coast for four days. And we were up again in June. It's exciting." TGC

Employee Ideas

As the new owners of Atlantic Garden Center, Christian and Sarah Dulina reworked payroll to keep more of their best employees year-round. That decision is paying dividends in a number of ways, not the least of which is having a great group of creative employees around to upgrade facilities and displays at a time when staffing was traditionally bare bones.

"We always came back from the ANLA Retail Roadshows with so many ideas and I don't know if we ever got one of them done. It was always the same: we're slow, we don't have money, we have to lay everybody off, we don't have anyone to do the projects," Sarah says. "This year we took two employees on the tour with us so they could bring back ideas too, and I wish you could see all the things we have torn down and repainted and rebuilt in the last few weeks."

"It was the first time they had been on a trip for work," Christian says. "We got back on Friday and they were to have the weekend off, but one just couldn't wait and came back on Sunday and did a whole eco-friendly display."