

GARDEN & Chic life

Adventures in
IGC Entrepreneurial
Retailing

featuring
Martin Viette Nurseries
East Norwich, NY

Russell and Mike Ireland, Co-owners

A SHORT 35 MILES FROM MANHATTAN, Martin Viette Nurseries offers a peaceful retreat from the hustle and bustle of one of the most populous metropolitan areas in the world. Third generation Co-owners, brothers Russell III and Mike Ireland (pictured right, from left), carry on the tradition of making Martin Viette a destination shopping experience. "It's a very comfortable parklike setting to shop in," Mike says. "We're on 42 acres. When you pull up and get out of your car, you are put at ease," Russ says.

The shopping experience across 7 acres of selling space is inspired, with eye-catching vignettes at every turn. "A lot of our merchandising is based on lifestyle and showing our product the way it would look in the home or garden," Mike says. The goal is to create a comfortable yet upscale finished look. "Most of our store is lit with low-voltage flood lighting," Mike says, "so when you walk in, you're not under these bright florescent white lights." Russ adds, "We try to get that generic, kind of cold feeling out of the store."

All of the products in the garden gift department are merchandised on antique pine and natural oak furniture, such as credenzas, armoires and tables. "We paint in the spring, and then we'll change colors in the summer and fall - there are probably 10 layers of paint on some of these things," Mike says. Even packaged product, such as small fertilizer or remedy offerings are displayed on oak or birch-veneered bookshelves for appeal. Although the furniture pieces are used for displays, the garden center has sold them, too. "We put a price tag on everything because people do ask," Mike says.

"Everything's for sale. There's a price tag on my brother," Russ jokes, "if somebody wants him, he's getting sold."



The 'Fresh' Edge

Making the garden center look different each time a customer comes in is key in keeping their interest. "Some of our set areas are always there, but the fixtures in the displays are always changing," Mike says. "We probably completely turn the place over, display-wise, six to seven times a year. That's how we've appealed to the Gen X/Gen Y customer base." Both Gen Xers themselves - Mike is 42, Russ is 44 - the duo credits being able to attract younger customers to their employees, too. "A lot of our staff is in the Gen X/Gen Y category. We give them the opportunity to incorporate their lifestyle and generation into the product mix and also into our visual merchandising," Mike says.

A benefit of being so close to Manhattan is be-

ing able to visit the most cutting-edge retailers for product mix and visual merchandising ideas. Inspiration comes from *Garden Chic* magazine, too, Mike says, "I like the clean lines. I like the color. I like the lifestyle photos on the cover. And I also like the content inside - it's pertinent. It is for us. It is for our generation now."

Martin Viette's buyers also serve as the department manager or the floor manager for a specific department, giving them an edge in knowing what their customers want. "They're not sitting up at a desk, just buying and looking at a computer screen to see what sells," Mike says. "They are actually down on the floor with the customers, listening to their requests and selling the product."

The system in place to introduce the right amount of new merchandise is the "old 80/20 rule," Mike says, "where 80 percent of our product mix every year pretty much stays the same, and we try to incorporate 20 percent of new, then see what sticks to the wall with that new product." Russ adds, "There are always hits, and there are always misses. I would say that the 80/20 keeps us pretty safe. It doesn't let anybody overbuy something that's untested."

And test, they do. In the past few years, the garden center has worked to narrow its broad selection of organic remedies to the most effective options through trial testing. "Between our own use and our staff's use, we have narrowed the selection down to the ones we know work," Mike says. They also trial green goods before putting them out for sale. "We tend to trial them a year or two before they go out into the market, to test their performance," Mike says. "We tend to sell larger plant material to Gen X/Gen Y and the demographics of our area with larger homes. It's that instant gratification." ■