

Buchanan's Native Plants: In It for the Long Term

Twenty-five years and counting, organics is the focus.

by
Amy Stewart

DONNA BUCHANAN WOULD BE the first to admit that when she founded Buchanan's Native Plants with her sister in 1986, they jumped in with more enthusiasm than experience. "We didn't even do the recommended year or two of working for a garden center before we started to run one," she says. "We just loved gardening. I fell in love with the native plants concept. I was so crazy about perennials in general and natives in particular, and I thought, people are going to want this."

Inspired by Sally Wasowski's book *Native Texas Plants*, she and her sister knew natives would catch on among Houston gardeners. "It was such an eye-opener," Buchanan says. "The photographs were so beautiful, and the author had such a nice philosophy."

Buchanan knew some garden cen-



ters in Houston carried native plants, but they weren't specializing in them, and some didn't even know they were native. "That's why I chose to put 'native plants' in the name of our business. I thought it was the best way to market ourselves," she says.

Today, about 30 percent of the garden center's overall sales are in native plants, and the percentage is higher in some categories like trees and shrubs.

The organic concept was an important part of the business from the beginning. Because native plants require less fertilizer, fewer pesticides, and little water, it made

sense to have an organic focus. "Being an old hippie," Buchanan says, "I thought organic was the next big thing, that both natives and organic would catch on together."

Where It Fits

During its almost 25 years in business, the retail operation has kept its focus on natives and organics. It began in a rented space, and soon after, a lot in a residential neighborhood was purchased. "There was hardly any zoning," Buchanan says. "It was just a corner lot with a little brick house that had been boarded up."

At first, the sisters worked part-

time jobs and in the garden center on their alternate days off. But the move to a new location represented a desire to expand the business. "I didn't want it to be a hobby," Buchanan says. "I wanted to have the best garden center in Houston."

Since then, Buchanan's has purchased three adjacent properties, redesigned the garden center, expanded the parking lot and renovated the



gift shop. A new gift shop manager, hired from a Smith & Hawken store that closed, has overseen the remodel and expansion. Today the 1½-acre garden center employs as many as 30 staff members.

"We're lucky that we get to enjoy year-round gardening in Houston," Buchanan says. "We get a little bit of a slow season in the heat of the summer and in January, but that's about it."

A 60'x60' greenhouse accommodates tropicals and tender annuals, and a stand-alone metal building houses fertilizers, pesticides and hardgoods.

"We sell a lot of insecticides like spinosad and Sluggo. We do well with

those major, well-known brands," Buchanan says.

In keeping with the Texas focus, the store sells MicroLife fertilizer, made by a company based in the Texas Gulf region. "We sell a couple of pallets a week of their products," Buchanan says. "We also do a lot of Lady Bug Natural Brand fertilizers, which come from John Dromgoole in Austin." Another local company, Nature's Way Resources, supplies the store with compost, mulch and other bagged goods.

Buchanan gives her managers the ability to respond to what customers want. "We used to have a strict organic policy, but we've softened that a little," she says. "We're not sticklers. We want to provide what people want. We've never been totally organic, but we are very supportive of it, and organic is always our first recommendation. People came in, asking for items they saw advertised at that hardware store three blocks away, and we decided that we didn't want to make them go down the street." Even customers who are pro-organic, she says, "sometimes just want to kill that bug." Today, about 75 percent of the products the garden center carries are organic.

This approach translates to the way plants in the nursery are managed, too. "Rarely do we use a non-organic product on our own plants," Buchanan says. "The people in charge care as much as I do or more - they try to walk the walk. But every now and then, we've got to spray a little Roundup."

The garden center carries a line of organic seeds from Botanical Interests, and makes sure that edible plants are treated organically in the garden center because customers are more concerned about organics when it comes to the food they eat.

Eco-Education & Initiatives

The garden center hosts some in-store events and speakers with ex-

pertise on organics, and the staff is knowledgeable enough to be able to talk to customers one-on-one about organic approaches such as integrated pest management.

In fact, one of the most popular organic products has been live ladybugs. "We have them on display by the register, and people buy them all year round. We sell over a thousand per year," Buchanan says. "We tried praying mantis and decollate snails, but people complained they didn't hatch." When customers ask for other live bugs, the staff directs them to the garden center's website, where they can link to order from Arbico Organics, a seller of a wide range of beneficial insects. Buchanan says, "That works much better because they direct-ship, and they sell specific nematodes for specific problems, which is much better than trying to stock perishable creatures ourselves."

Reducing and reusing plastic is another important eco-friendly initiative at Buchanan's. One of its plant wholesalers, Nortex Wholesale Nursery, supplies some plants in biodegradable pots. The garden center also uses paper pulp pots when they repot seedlings. Buchanan helped start a recycling program at a local arboretum to recycle or reuse nursery plastic, and she encourages customers to use the program or to simply bring their flats and pots back to the store.

"We started asking the growers to take their plastic back," she says. "As costs increase, growers started to be more thrifty and realize that those pots cost money. Now they want them back. We just sort them by style, and depending on how much room they have in truck, they will take them back."

Spreading the Word

Buchanan's location in a revitalized Victorian neighborhood, Houston Heights, makes it easy to attract shoppers. "This has become a very



popular neighborhood in the last seven to eight years," Buchanan says. "We have a great shopping district nearby that's very attractive to people from outlying areas."

Two other garden shops in the neighborhood help make the location a destination for organic gardeners. "We're seeing younger customers coming in now that the schools have improved. There are a lot more young families just starting out, but we also have our share of million-dollar homes in the area," Buchanan says.

Most of the garden center's advertising of organics is in its weekly e-mail newsletter, which goes out to 8,000 addresses. Using Constant Contact, the garden center sees a 30 percent

open rate. "We can see the response immediately," Buchanan says.

E-mail addresses are acquired through the reward program. Customers accumulate points based on purchases, then the garden center announces a limited time period for those loyal shoppers to redeem their points. "We send out a birthday card with a \$10 coupon," Buchanan says.

The marketing and promotional event efforts are rewarded when customers come in droves for their unique offerings. A family-run local company grows organic heirloom tomatoes for Buchanan's, and on the first Saturday in February, 200 to 300 people come out for their Annual Tomato Time sale. Buchanan says, "People are waiting at the gate in the morning." ■

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