

Still Growing After 65 Years

Contributed by Amanda Ryder

With 65 years of growing under its belt, it's clear that Marigold Nurseries knows a thing or two about providing its customers with great service and quality.

Marigold Nurseries is one of the largest nurseries in Victoria, B.C., and has been going strong for three generations. It began with Les Smith way back in 1944 as an operation that specialized in bedding plants. Marigold Nurseries has since passed through the hands of Les's sons Raymond and Len Smith and expanded into a retail operation in 1981. Today, Raymond serves as owner along with his wife Libby and his children, Brooke, Rayanne and Randy, the centre's third generation. Randy assists in managing the operation and Rayanne will be managing Marigold Nurseries' new location in Duncan, B.C. (more on that later).

Randy and Brooke Smith are both managers at Marigold Nurseries; the centre uses consistent signage to identify plants for customers; a display at the centre and the garden centre's popular pottery barn.

Brooke Smith has been involved with the garden centre since 2000 and acts as the retail manager. Brooke says Marigold Nurseries is probably known best for its bedding plants, an area the company has perfected after over a half-century of growing. Staff grow about 80 per cent of their bedding plants and annuals and do their own poinsettias, garden mums and most of their own containers on site in their greenhouse. "Having those on site greenhouses allows customers to watch the products grow. They are always welcome to have a look around," says Smith. The business tagline proclaims "great selection, friendly service" and Marigold Nurseries strives hard to deliver customers with high-quality plants that

last.

The garden centre offers approximately 30,000 square feet of retail area -- 25,000 of which are under cover so customers can shop in any kind of weather, year-round. There are also two acres of retail nursery stock. When customers walk into Marigold Nurseries, they enter a huge courtyard area and then have access to the full-service store. From there, shoppers have several options. "We've got a beautiful tropical house and then outside are all of our annuals and perennials. We've got five bays of undercover areas with tables filled with plants," says Smith. Another highlight is the centre's pottery barn, which is filled with a variety of containers and hard goods. "It's all sorted by colours so it's easy shopping and that's one of our biggest sellers. We got a huge statuary area and fountains too."

To help shoppers navigate the centre's extensive retail space, Marigold Nurseries gives its customers a little extra help through signage and information brochures. In the spring, before people head to the 16 different areas of field plants, they can grab a directory. If they are looking for a specific plant, they will see the area where it's located and head towards that sign. "Sometimes it changes and we keep on top of that. They can find the product just by grabbing that sheet or paper or looking before they enter the field. It's self help so they don't have to constantly find somebody to ask, which can get frustrating for customers if it's busy and there's a lineup," says Smith. This careful attention to signage is used throughout the garden centre where each plant has a sign that includes the name and three points to highlight the variety's growing preferences. This format is used on every plant to present a consistent and professional appearance and to educate shoppers.

The garden centre also makes sure to take care of its younger customers. Marigold Nurseries hosts a kids' club once a month that's completely free. There are two, eight-by-12 gardens that little green thumbs can work on monthly. The garden centre also hosts special events where kids can build a veggie garden, carve a pumpkin or make their own Christmas wreath for a small fee.

Another popular service that customers have grown to love is the Plant-It-Yourself area. People can buy their plant and pot at Marigold Nurseries and plant the container at the centre for a minimal charge. Customers have access to soil and fertilizer and have the satisfaction of creating their own pot, but don't have to worry about cleaning up dirt. Smith says they didn't have the space to set the area up this year, but are hoping to bring it back in 2010.

When it comes to purchasing products, Smith says staff like to keep a close eye on the items they bring in. "With nursery stock and hard goods, we like to go to the nurseries and warehouses to personally check out the products," she says. "This way we know the quality and look of the items before they arrive at our store." This policy extends from large trees to pottery because, as Smith says, "pictures are worth a lot but you can't beat seeing the product in person."

The operation employs approximately 25 full-time staff members and this number climbs to between 50 and 60 people during peak times. Smith says they train their staff by allowing them to shadow more experienced workers for a week. A new staff member will receive a full training booklet to inform them about their new position and then experience on-the-job training to get them up to speed. Employees that have been with the business for a number of years or those who have a supervisory role have gone down to the OFA Short Course in Ohio for seminars and educational opportunities.

In previous years, Smith says staffing has been a big challenge, although in 2009, perhaps in part due to the recession, employees seemed to come to them. "It was really hard to find someone willing to work for the wages that we can pay," says Smith. "It's keeping them on too. They would come for two months and leave and that was a challenge we had too." Smith adds that many employees have stuck around and are crucial to the operation. "We do have a wonderful solid crew of employees on hand, some who have been around for more than 20 years and many more who have been on for 10 or more years.

They are our extended family. And all have a very important role in our ongoing success."

Marigold Nurseries has a strong commitment to its customers and community and host a number of seminars and events at the garden centre, several of which benefit local charities and groups. They host a "Summer Wine Down" in September and this year the proceeds from tickets and 10 per cent of sales for the event will go to the SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). Customers can attend gardening seminars or mingle and walk the gardens with wine in hand. Marigold Nurseries also hosts a Customer Appreciation Day prior to Christmas with food, beverages and an open house. The garden centre is decorated to the nines for Christmas and Smith calls it just a "good atmosphere at that time of year."

This fall brings an exciting new change to the 65-year-old company. September marks the grand opening for Marigold Nurseries' brand new location in Duncan, B.C. The business will be a retail-only garden centre, with no growing and is located approximately an hour and 45 minutes away from Victoria. "It's really exciting. It's a state-of-the-art, brand new, gorgeous retail space," says Smith. "It's set in the valley in Duncan and the view behind is a beautiful mountain." The journey to open a new location has spanned a year and a half and lots of research. "My dad (Raymond) was the main brain behind it. He did a lot of research, a lot of looking around and talked to a lot of different people to find out what was best suited to the area and what was best suited to us." They chose Duncan because it isn't serviced by a nearby garden centre and is an area where a lot of communities are starting up. Smith anticipates that they will be catering to a lot of new homeowners.

When asked what their customers love most about the garden centre, Smith says, "they love coming here because it's fun." Customers appreciate the hard-working Marigold staffers and have come to recognize the friendly service. "We all work as a team here and take much pride in the products we grow and it shows in the quality of the plants that make their way out of our greenhouses. We all like to have a lot of fun around here and really enjoy making our customers smile," says Smith.