

A Keen Sense for Sales

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Wingard's Market

Location: Lexington, South Carolina

Established: 1968

Size: Garden center—3 acres; gift shop—1,000 sq.ft.

Employees: 7 full time; 18 seasonal/part time

Known for: Started as azalea experts, now a full service garden market offering plants, gifts, fresh produce, birding, events & workshops



Many of the *Green Profit*/Dümmen Orange Young Retailer Award winners who grace our September covers are born into the business, learning from a young age both the horticultural and managerial “must knows” to successfully transition the garden center to the next generation. As last year’s winner and third-generation retailer Will Heeman described it, he “grew up in the peat moss pile.”

That’s not the case with this year’s winner, Andrea Snelgrove, gift shop manager and merchandising manager for Wingard’s Market in Lexington, South Carolina. She had a relatively peat-free upbringing in a family that was not involved in agricultural enterprises, aside from her mother’s green thumb and family’s well-kept yard. But the characteristics that have made Andrea excel first a sales associate and then as a manager are ones she inherited from her family: An instinct for working hard from her grandfather, a need to present the best version of oneself at all times from her mother, and a love of the outdoors from her entire family.

Green Profit chatted with Andrea recently to learn more about what makes her tick and how she became so good at knowing what people will buy. What follows is a gently edited version of our conversation.

Green Profit: I noticed on the Young Retailer Award nomination form submitted on your behalf that your prior experience was at two other garden centers. Where did the interest in working at garden centers come from?

Andrea Snelgrove: The interest really began with my parents. We’ve always been an outdoorsy family and my mom has always had a green thumb. I guess it’s genetic! There was a new garden center being built on her drive to work, and we’d pass it and watch the progress. She said, “You should apply there.” I had no clue what my interests were at that point, I was only about 17. I applied and started out as a cashier, and this actually is a couple of miles from Wingard’s. I worked there for about two years then I started working at Wingard’s almost immediately after. I left Wingard’s while I went to school for horticulture and while I was gone I worked at a garden center in Greenville for another year. Wingard’s helped me get that job.

GP: That must mean they believed in you right from the start.

AS: They are my family and they’ve always looked out for me. I don’t really like calling Delores [Wingard Steinhauser] my boss. She’s more of my mentor.

GP: I see that you have two degrees, the first one is in horticulture. Why was that? Why not something else?

AS: When I started working at the first garden center I just fell in love with it. Even though I was a cashier, I’d go out to the perennials and the annuals and learn about those plants. And I already knew a lot coming into the job thanks to my mom. I had no clue there was such a thing as a horticulture program, to be honest. When I started working at Wingard’s I met a girl who was in FFA and she introduced me to the horticulture program. We ended up going to college together.

GP: I see you also received a degree in business management. What made you pursue that?

AS: As much as I love horticulture I was concerned that if I needed to find another job in the future I would need something else under my belt. I felt like it was necessary. In addition, if I wanted to become management at Wingard's I needed that business experience and knowledge. That's why I went for the management degree, so I could understand everything I'd need to know about managing a business.

GP: Do you use both degrees or do you find you use one degree more than the other?

AS: I feel like I use them both together. I'm still going back to my weed identification books that I used in school and I really think back to what I learned in management to take care of situations here if needed.

GP: Delores also mentioned you had a good intuitive sense about the industry. Where do you think that comes from?

AS: I think I learn a lot just paying attention to yards I pass and to what Wally and Delores have taught me. Plus looking in magazines. If you see a lot of something you know it's popular. You know customers are going to be asking for it. I try to depend on my common sense knowledge of things. And I think that's why I fell in love with the horticulture industry, because it's a lot of common sense.



GP: You mentioned magazines. What kind of magazines do you turn to for trends and how do you monitor the trends?

AS: I keep an eye on Pinterest. Pinterest has a huge influence on our gift shop, produce market and with the succulents in our perennial department. I also look at the Southern home magazines. Our demographic is women ages 35-75 and that's really what they look at—Better Homes and Gardens, Southern Living—magazines like that, so I keep an eye on what's featured in them. Also, if I go to a doctor's office and I see pages in magazines that have really been ruffled, I take a look at what's on those pages!

GP: You have a gift for figuring out what products are attractive to your older clients but also having products sought after by a younger clientele. Where do you get those product ideas?

AS: We go to AmericasMart in Atlanta. Truly, that market shows a lot of trends because you can see which are the busier showrooms. But I also go around to our local businesses, which also focus on a similar demographic. So I look to see what they are selling. It's all about paying attention.

I pay close attention at market. Products that are practical or useful sell for us. We started getting in more products that are eco-friendly, and we've found that younger parents are really into them. We're trying to bring in that Millennial parent. They are conscientious about where things are coming from, what chemicals are in them and if they are safe for children and pets. With everything going on in the world, they are paying more attention. Our produce market triggered that thought process for me because of how customers were caring about where their food came from.

GP: Are you involved with the produce market?

AS: I merchandise it and I'm also a really good taste tester! If I buy a product and take it home and fall in love with it, I'll tell the produce manager to do a demonstration using that product. I'm a big cook and I really like testing the products, and if I'm in the market I love selling them! It's so easy to sell something if you've used it.

GP: Right, workshops and events! You said Wingard's is well known for those. Tell me about them.

AS: We love to teach customers as much as they love to learn. We really emphasize teaching our customers. We teach workshops that we don't even sell products for—it's just about getting them to know how to make it. Our most recent workshop was on making an irrigation system for a raised garden, and that topic didn't include any products we sell. But it did show customers how to keep their gardens going. We love making things easier for our customers.

We also have a lot of winter events that get girlfriends out. I coordinate a community event in Lexington that encourages shopping local. I coordinate local businesses to have their open houses on one weekend. It's like a self-guided tour. Customers go to each store that weekend to get their Christmas shopping done. This will be our fourth year. We've grown from seven businesses participating the first year to 15 businesses this year.

GP: What are you the most proud of during your eight years at Wingard's?

AS: I'm proud of the gift shop and how far it's come. It's gone from two rooms to six. Because we built a new building, the entire 100-year-old house is the gift shop rather than just a quarter of it. It's the center of the business. I love it because the house has attitude and personality.

(Editor's note: Andrea should be very proud of the gift shop for another reason, as well. In Andrea's nomination form, Delores noted that since Andrea took over the gift shop in 2012, gift shop revenues have gone from \$185,000 to a projected \$375,000 for 2017!)

GP: What changes would you suggest to the industry so it could be of more interest to folks of all ages?

AS: I think we need to be careful when we throw around terminology, especially when it comes to pesticides, fungicides, etc. A lot of times it scares customers. Many companies have been doing well making the packaging appear friendlier. If we teach the customers what each one is, that would help. When there is something wrong with the plant, many customers are scared to put anything on it. But as a whole, I think it's all

about making things appear simpler. We tend to give the technical aspects of everything. Plants are so much fun to work with! Whenever I sell a plant to somebody I try to tell them how cool it is and what it can do for your yard, instead of saying, "This is a 12-ft. tree." We need to be more upbeat about it and boost the benefits of everything. That would really encourage the younger generation. Really, customers want to know how it's going to benefit me.

GP: What's your favorite part of your job?

AS: I honestly don't feel like I'm coming to work. I love coming here, and I love making things beautiful. My mom always encouraged me to keep the house presentable when company came over. And that's how I feel when customers come in. They are my company. They are coming into my home. And that's the best part—keeping things pretty and presentable so every time a customer comes in they have a new experience. It's not the same old thing all the time. I love seeing our customers' reactions.

GP: What's one thing you really want to get across to our readers?

AS: It would be to keep a positive attitude. It's either your customer's first time or their millionth time in your store. But that one current impression is what will keep them coming back. **GP**