



## Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

### GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Gary "Guy" Prevost, Owner

Atlantic Gardening Company, Raleigh, NC

### 'Something Bigger' Brewing Behind the Scenes at Atlantic Gardening Company



Always resting on the cusp of another business venture, Gary "Guy" Prevost has ambitious plans for his Raleigh, NC-based independent garden center, Atlantic Gardening Company, which he bought in early 2016 after leaving the investment banking world. With a little over two years in the IGC industry behind him, Guy already has a firm vision in place, as well as multiple opportunities to improve upon his practices, to help his business rise to millions in dollars of sales annually.

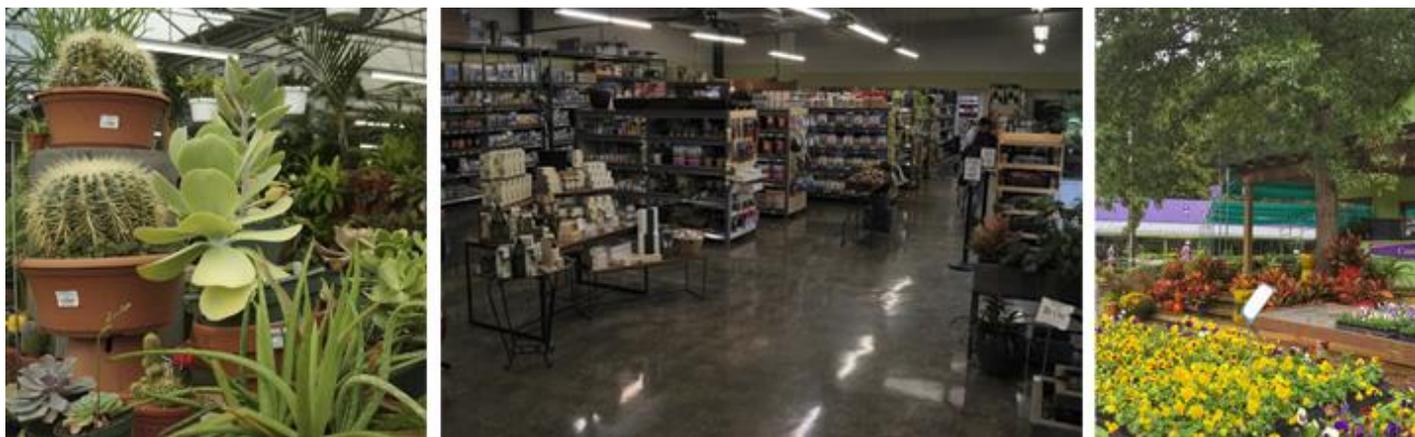
"Our mission breaks down to five bullet points: The first is to deliver the highest quality products and services possible," he explains. "The second is to deliver knowledgeable, courteous and professional service; third is a diverse selection of products; the fourth is value to our customers; and the fifth is positive experiences in all our interactions."

But making money isn't what's driving Guy to succeed – it's a more personal goal. "My goal here is to create a company that's bigger than me, meaning profit-sharing with my employees," he says. "Eventually, I want to give the company to the employees."

Guy is a forward-thinking, hands-on owner who's always ready for the next venture around the corner. "Garden centers of yesteryear will not be around in five years," he says. "The landscape is changing too fast. So, I always ask my core team, 'What are we doing for tomorrow,' because I don't sit around and react."

He knows that, for the most part, consumers at all levels are shopping online, and even on their phones. Millennials and Gen Z, especially, are shopping on mobile devices and through social platforms, like Instagram and Snapchat, because they shop "visually." And that's why

he's started selling gifts, soils, hydroponic supplies and more on his website and through other online retailers, such as eBay and Amazon.



Every item in-store is compared to prices online to make sure Atlantic Gardening Company sells it for a fair, competitive price.

His finger is always on the pulse of what's selling, making sure to adjust inventory as trends start to skew, as well as how the housing market around him is performing. "We are in the city of Raleigh, which is expected to double in size in the next 10 years."

In the next five years, Guy predicts he will have three to five stores in the Raleigh area. "We're currently looking to open another location," he says.



In addition to exploring expansion, Guy has started a partnership with a couple other people to open the largest urban farm in America. Right now, they have access to 29 acres inside the city. And that's not all.

He's interested in starting a hemp farm and opening a processing location for CBD oils.

"We're trying to change the way we do things, and I'm trying to change the way people think," Guy says. "The hardest thing to do in a garden center is to teach people who've done the same thing for 20 years that what they did, the way they do things, no longer works. But the market has changed, and we have to keep pace."

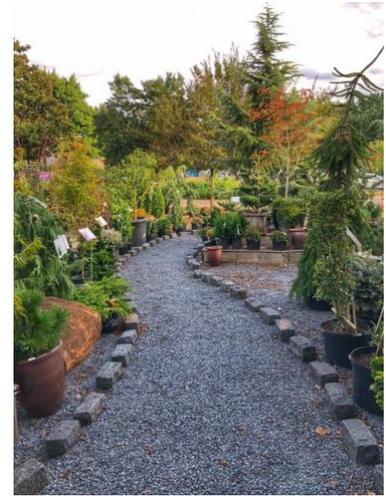
He's always asking himself and his staff critical questions, adjusting and readjusting practices until it works. That's why he loves attending garden center tours, like the GCA Summer Tour in June, to bring away new ways of doing things.

“My big takeaway from the GCA Summer Tour Seattle that I noticed was consistent at all the successful garden centers we visited was – in order to be a good garden center, you need to be managed professionally,” Guy says. “Not fly-by-night. You’ve got to be disciplined.”

He attests that touring other garden centers helped him see how he previously ran away from discipline and structure, because that’s what he was used to at his previous job. “I told my staff that I need to start managing and teaching my managers how to manage effectively.” Weekly meetings to go over sales figures and plans will be conducted, too.

Visual merchandising was a key takeaway as well, in addition to signage and the layout of the nursery yards at each stop. They noticed how some retailers didn’t position plants in alphabetical order, but rather in an order that blended complementary colors and textures together, making it visually interesting and easy for the customer to arrange plants for their gardens and landscapes.

“We’ve already started the conversation about redoing our store,” he says. “Our store is very clean and organized, but the lines are too hard. We’re going to do away with aisles and add more islands for a softer, more organic feel.”



Another big benefit of the GCA Summer Tour was the connections he made with key staff members from Molbak’s Garden + Home and Roger’s Gardens. Guy shares that plans are developing to have his merchandisers work in those two stores for a week or two to learn their practices and bring them back to Atlantic Gardening Company

“The networking was really powerful,” he says. “The GCA Summer Tour is absolutely worth every penny. The quality people, the garden centers – across the board – it was an exceptional experience. We’re looking forward to the next one.”

## **One of a Kind**

While retailers in all industries are worried about capturing Millennial and Gen Z shoppers, Guy is focused on what he says really matters – disposable income. “All I care about is people with disposable income,” he says. “I think there’s far too much emphasis on Millennials and Gen Z. The focus should really be on your product selection. Let’s go back to the Smith & Hawken, West Elm and Crate & Barrel stores.



“The reason people shop those stores isn’t because they’re tailored to Gen X or Millennials or another generation, it’s because they have good taste – they have style.”

Guy tries hard to carefully curate a good, stylistic selection of product at the heart of his successful IGC. Each item has a reason for being there – it’s the best product for a certain need or problem and they believe in the product itself.

Providing a vision for his employees, Guy says he’s moving his store to be a cross between Crate & Barrel and Smith & Hawken that offers a much more curated selection of green goods and other products. “I don’t want to be everything to

everyone – I want to be exceptional in a few categories,” he says. “I am actively eliminating product categories that even though are making me money, they’re not in our vision of where we want to be.”

The green goods department, which accounts for 50 percent of the retailer’s revenue and is the most well-known aspect of Atlantic Gardening Company, is moving toward a smaller footprint and learning how to operate more efficiently to encourage more inventory turns.

The retailer has been experimenting more with “packaged” gardens, or grab-and-go container gardens, making the arrangements as visually appealing as possible. Guy attributes these pre-assembled gardens as part of the reason to the greenhouse’s success. Atlantic Gardening Company is also known for its stunning orchids – so much so that Beyoncé’s entourage stopped in the store to decorate the singer’s dressing room while she was performing in town. Custom succulent arrangements are a runaway success, too.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to what’s going to give customers the best experience and one of the store’s biggest experience-drivers is its Garden Bar, stationed in a heavily trafficked area of the store. The bar is constructed out of black walnut and the wall-mounted taps sport custom-made hand tools. For \$5, guests can order beer from local breweries, as well as wine and prosecco.



Guy has acknowledged that the bar is a great marketing tool for the store. “A lot of the brewery owners started shopping here because we feature their beers,” he says. “We do

cross-promotions with them. We feature them on social media and vice versa. We do these tap takeovers where they come in and talk about their beers.”

Another big experience-driver is the store’s unique loyalty program. It’s free to register, and every purchase accumulates in points. Then, 5 percent of those points are translated into coupons to the store.

“We do that for our customers, and it creates loyalty. We get a lot of repeat customers,” Guy says. “We remind ourselves all the time the reason we’re here is because of these customers, so we want them to have a good time.”



But the biggest factor for creating a fun, memorable in-store experience isn’t any of those things. “A lot of the fun in-store has a lot to do with the attitude of the employees,” he says.

He makes sure to create a fun, laid-back atmosphere so that his staff is happy to come to work each day. Guy identifies himself as the “crazy, outlandish one” who’s always cracking jokes and making people smile.

But he also cares about their well-being and livelihood. “My employees matter. People cannot survive on \$10/hour, so I do everything I can to put the money back into the hands of the people who need it.”

It’s the little things, like a free beer at the end of a long day or a portion of shares in the landscape company, that show how much he cares. And with the low employee turnover, it seems to be working.

Even though his eyes are trained on the future, exploring brand expansion and new business ventures to create something bigger than himself, Guy’s work ethic never forgets the most important aspects of Atlantic Gardening Company’s success: the customers, the employees and the curated, unique product selection.

Guy says, “I want us to have those raving fan customers - customers that absolutely love us because they know we will do whatever we can for them.”