



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Steve Echter, President

Echter's Nursery & Garden Center, Arvada, CO

Echter's Helps Customers 'Make Life Beautiful' With Homegrown Flowers & Evolving Product Mix



Operating as one of the largest retail plant nurseries and garden centers in Colorado, Echter's Nursery & Garden Center has built up an experience that customers can agree lives up to the retailer's tagline: "We're a little out of the way, but we're quite out of the ordinary!"

The Arvada-based indie garden center originally grew carnations on the same property in 1959, then transitioned into a retail garden store by 1978. Since then, the garden center has renovated and expanded to include annuals, perennials, roses, trees, shrubs, houseplants, patio furniture, garden decor, gifts, grills, birding supplies and some landscaping services.

"Echter's is known for our friendly, knowledgeable salespeople," President Steve Echter says. "And we grow most of our own flowers, but we really excel at our annuals."



Steve makes sure customers can easily find staff on the sales floor at all time. "We have more associates on the floor morning and night," he says. "We have a plant doctor who is

stationed at the front of the store all the time, seven days a week. There's always someone who can answer questions, and that's the first person customers see when they walk in the store."

Besides the resident plant doctor, who has a minimum of 10 years' experience, customers are greeted by inspiring merchandise displays at the entrance that reflect the seasons or the latest trends in gardening. New product is showcased in this special area, as well.

A special membership in True Value's garden center division, Home & Garden Showplace, has given Steve the ability to expand his business and provide more choices to his customers that wouldn't have been available without it.



"It's helped a lot," he says. "They've given us another source of product and access to private label products that we wouldn't have had. True Value is by far our biggest vendor – they have product in stock when you need it and a lot of assortment of different products, as well."



Steve has also looked to industry associations and shows, such as Garden Centers of America (GCA) and the IGC Show, to help evolve his business and garner ideas to inspire customers.

"We've gone on the GCA Summer Tours for several years, and we go to the IGC Show in Chicago every single year," he says. "We definitely get a lot of ideas – more than we can implement. We come home with so many different ideas that we have a full list of things we

want to try out."

And when he's stuck in a rut or just needs to talk to another garden center owner who has been through the same experience, Steve turns to his fellow GCA members for guidance.

"The networking has always been the main feature of being a GCA member," he says. "The best networking occurs on the bus during the GCA Summer Tours. You have so many opportunities to see more people and network."

Adapting to Survive & Thrive

Steve joined the family business of growing carnations right out of school. “I really wasn’t planning on staying in the business, but I got interested in it.”

Soon after he joined, the carnations market had largely been transferred to growers in South America, so the growing operation searched for ways to diversify itself. They landed on bedding plants, and within a few years, the Eichters completely phased out carnations and opened a retail garden store.



Now, Steve operates the company with his brother and business partner, Dave Echter, Vice President and General Manager. The brothers work hard to adapt the business to ever-changing market conditions.



“You have to do that to survive,” Steve says. “We’re always looking at what’s working and what’s not. We try to expand what’s working and pull back on what’s not.”

They’ve recognized rising consumer gardening trends, such as fairy gardening, and capitalized on them. “The fairy gardening category has been really big for us,” he says. “It’s stayed strong, too. We’ve had kids come into the store and run straight back to where the fairy gardening supplies are. They remembered seeing the fairy gardens and how exciting that part of the store was for them.”

Steve has noticed an uptick of young families and first-time homebuyers who just got started in gardening in the store. “I think the younger generations have taken an interest in the farm-to-table movement and supporting local businesses.”

Despite the launch of Amazon's Plants Store, Steve doesn't feel the heat of competition from online retailers.

"We've been lucky as far as the online competition," he says. "It hasn't impacted us as much because of the type of product we sell. Our industry has an advantage – we can create an entertaining experience in-store to give the customer a reason to come to our store. We've always had a different kind of store, and that gives our customers a reason to make our store their No.1 gardening resource."



Steve knows he has to keep his eye on online retailers in the future, and is ready to adapt his family business further to keep up with consumers' shopping habits and navigate Echter's well into the future.