



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile

Dana Pike-Van Vlake, President/CEO

The Family Tree Garden Center, Snellville, GA

Family Tree Builds On Family Legacy, Branches Out with Fresh Inspiration



As the daughter of Pete Pike, Dana Pike-Van Vlake grew up learning the in's and out's of successful garden retailing from one of the best. Her dad was the founder of Pike Nurseries, the Atlanta-based retail powerhouse that consistently ranked at the top of IGC Magazine's IGC 100 report prior to joining forces with No. 1 Armstrong Garden Centers in 2008. Dana's roots and knowledge grew deeper after she graduated from the University of Georgia with a marketing degree and decided to stay in the family business for the next 20 years.

When Pete sold the business, Dana thought she would enjoy retired life for a few years, playing tennis and taking care of her family. But the dream of owning her own garden center stayed with her – after all, it's in her blood.

Then a former Pike Nurseries location became available, and all the pieces fell into place.

In March 2010, Dana opened The Family Tree Garden Center in Snellville, GA. She sought to continue her father's legacy and expand upon it with new ideas that would make the garden shopping experience that much more enjoyable for today's consumer.

Many of the new ideas Dana implemented this season came from her experience on the GCA Summer Tour of Ohio last year. "I grew up in Pike, so I had only known Georgia nurseries. I'd never really been to other garden centers," she says. "In Ohio, the stores we visited were top-notch. We got so many great ideas. My iPad was completely full of pictures. We brought back those concepts and put them into play here."

For instance, Dana implemented a landscaping sketch service she first saw on the tour. Customers bring in photos of their yard to the landscape architect on staff. "We'll do a quick sketch – a plan for the yard or a part of the yard. Then, we'll show them the plants, and they buy them right then and there," she says. "What could have been a typical \$55 sale is now \$300, \$400, \$500 - because they have a plan."

The impact of this service goes beyond a one-time sale, she says. "These customers always come back because you've established a rapport. You've educated them. Now, they're going to be successful."

Dana is committed to keeping the shopping experience fresh at Family Tree. One of the benefits of owning and operating a single location is the flexibility in purchasing product, she says. "When we had 26 stores with Pike, you'd have to satisfy all 26 stores. When you have a single location, you can do more,"

she explains. “You can get specialty clients and buy from small, local growers. We don’t have to buy a thousand; we can buy 20. Sometimes, we have plants that are a year out from being introduced.”

‘We’re All Family’

While Dana brings inspired new concepts to her garden center, Family Tree is rooted in maintaining the traditions passed down from her father.

Dana wants her customers to know the garden center is founded on a solid legacy, one they are invited to be a part of. “When people come in, we tell the story of what Family Tree is, and that starts from the name because it is in my family tree, from my father, and passed down from generations to generations to come,” she says. “We look at our customers and employees as part of that family, too. It’s one big family tree.”

Dana makes customers feel at home by incorporating her family’s history and traditions around the garden center, like the rocking chairs on the front porch with her parents’ names on them and the store’s museum showcasing her father’s journey to success from his beginnings as a boy on the farm.

Making customers feel like a part of the business is the type of southern hospitality Family Tree draws upon to ensure repeat business. “Our customers are used to a little bit of hand-holding here because they need help. It’s our goal to always educate them because the better informed they are, the more successful they will be,” Dana says. “We want them to tell their friends about us. We know word of mouth is the best form of advertising.”

With reminders of the Pike family legacy throughout the garden center, Dana remains humble and appreciative of the successes she and her family have realized throughout the years.

The inspiration Dana gained from seeing the garden centers and networking with fellow industry professionals on the GCA Summer Tour was key in adding to her knowledge and experience. “I learned a lot,” she says.

She always collaborates with her team, which includes her general manager, who was her boss when she was only 16. “I rely on our staff. I trust them. They have a lot of ownership in what they do. They have great ideas, and nine times out of 10, we put their ideas into play.”

