



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

**GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile**  
**Sam Brown, Owner**  
**Fiddleheads Garden Center, Dalton, GA**

**Delivering Community Experiences, Remaining Vigilant of Consumer Trends Drive Growth for Georgia Indie**



The one mission that is top-of-mind for Sam Brown, Owner of Fiddleheads Garden Center, is to serve the community of Dalton, GA. “Our vision is to be an open place that’s welcome to everyone – a place that’s community-minded and -oriented, where people can come and have meetings,” he says. “We want to serve as many people in the community as possible.”

Focusing on the community has paid off for the independent garden center, as Fiddleheads Garden Center was named No. 45 in the 2017 Bulldog 100

Businesses list from Sam’s alma mater, the University of Georgia. Serving the people of Dalton attributed to the store’s steady growth percentage over a three-year period, catching the eye of the university.

Since its inception, Fiddleheads has been focused on delivering an exceptional experience for customers, and it’s apparent in the store’s country-rustic chic design and accents. Their newly updated – or, as Sam calls it, “down-dated” – bathroom facilities are always an entertaining hit with customers.



These modern-day “outhouses” are equipped with rusted tin wainscoting, barn-wood trim and heavy barn-wood doors. The walls are papered with pages from Sears and Roebuck catalogs dating back to 1902. The facilities were so unique that they won the first-place Gold Award in GCA’s Best Garden Center Bathrooms contest several years ago.

Fiddleheads is always finding new ways to entertain customers and keep them coming back to the store for more than just plants and other garden items. Events, such as a farmhouse dinner for a charitable organization, open up the store to a whole demographic of people who would have never thought to visit the garden center in the first place.

“The farmhouse dinner was a good way to attract a lot of people who have never been here before,” Sam says. “We tacked on a garden tour at some of our best customers’ homes where we’ve helped design their landscapes, then the group came back to the store for dinner afterward.”

He explains, “We’ve definitely been focusing more on the experience – it’s something that we’re still in the process of doing, but we’ve really upped our game on our big events.”

Their Fiddle Fest event in the fall drew more than a thousand people in one day to take advantage of the free petting zoo, bounce house, face painting, food and live music that was on-site.

“We do things to help get our name out into the community, using free events as a marketing tool, as well as a way to connect with the community and people who haven’t visited us before, or those who have the stigma that a local garden center is not for everyone,” says Sam.



The garden retailer hosts a full schedule of workshops for houseplants and beginner gardening classes, too. Those, coupled with the free family-friendly events, attract quite a bit of attention from Millennials and Gen Z shoppers.

As customers walk in the main store entrance, they’re transported into a wonderland of gifts, women’s apparel, jewelry, home decor and outdoor garden merchandise. This gift shop area was added onto the store in 2017, after Sam leased the space next door that used to be a bicycle shop. To get rid of the open, empty feeling, he built a small room at the center with three entrances to break up the

space. Elements of the store's overall country-rustic chic theme were incorporated into the space with barn wood.

The gift shop flows into the houseplants area, and bird-related products, chemicals and fertilizers round out the selection here. The retail greenhouse stems from the houseplants area, and features a "bloom bar," where designers create custom pots for shoppers. Annuals, perennials and hanging baskets reside in the greenhouse.



Leaving the greenhouse, customers can find pottery, trees, shrubs and more perennials. Bagged goods, such as soils, mulches and pine straw, sit at the back of the store.

Annuals and pine straw are some of the retailer's best-selling products, and houseplants and perennials, as well as gifts since the addition, are some of the fastest-growing categories. Their services are also growing to assist customers with tasks they may not have the time to do. Fiddleheads offers a custom-potting service, as well as landscape design. They collaborate with a local landscaper to implement the design, but they oversee the work to make sure it is done properly.

"It's been a really good, beneficial partnership," says Sam.

Each year, they've started growing more and more plant material in-house. "It's helped us keep our costs down and be able to offer a good price to customers, in addition to maintaining a good margin for us as well," he says. While they don't produce any trees or shrubs, they grow approximately 25 percent of the store's annuals and perennials.



Even with a successful operation that grows its offerings every year, Sam does not rest on his laurels. He's constantly striving to give his customers the best of the best in the garden world. And the main way to do that is through touring other independent garden center operations.

Full of inspiration from the 2018 GCA Summer Tour Seattle, Sam came back to his store energized and ready to improve his retail space with a long list of items to go over with his staff.

“We planned a slideshow meeting from all the photos I had taken,” he says. “The things that stood out to me the most were some of the methods of display. There were several really good examples of cross-marketing and a lot of creativity was on display.”



Sam points out that he really enjoyed touring Watson’s Greenhouse & Nursery. “They created some 10’x10’ vignettes of different environment settings, so they set up patio furniture with plants around it for a sun environment. Then, they had another one for shade. These vignettes gave customers an idea of what the finished product would look like and what plants worked well together.”

He continues: “Molbak’s displays were everywhere – in the gift shop, greenhouse, shrub yard – everything was great. They really have a good designer who takes the time to present merchandise very well.”

Despite the difference in store size, Ravenna Gardens was full of merchandising inspiration for Sam, as well. “Ravenna Gardens is set up a little differently than we are, and they utilize their space very well. Their displays were incredible, especially for stores with a smaller retail footprint. They gave some great ideas on how to maximize display space.”

Early on, Sam knew he wanted to do something different with his life, but wasn’t quite sure what. With a background in landscape architecture, he and his friend partnered up to open Fiddleheads Garden Center in 2011. Even eight years later, Sam has an unending desire to differentiate his store with the latest on the market.

“I’m one who doesn’t want to become stagnant, and I feel like GCA Summer Tours are a good energy boost and a great recharge for keeping things fresh,” Sam says. “I like to be on the cutting edge and on the frontline of the latest trends – not stuck in the older ways. The tours and our membership in GCA are great ways to keep us in the loop.”