



Garden Centers of America: Together We're Better!

GCA's Key Connections: Member Profile
Kristi Long, General Manager & Landscape Designer
The Gardens at The Ridge, Kerrville, TX

The Gardens At The Ridge Is Customers' Home Away From Home



Nestled in the tranquil hill country of Kerrville, TX, The Ridge Marketplace boasts a charming atmosphere, two on-site eateries, an event venue and an independent garden center to draw visitors from miles and miles away. "It's all about the community here at The Ridge," Kristi Long, General Manager and Landscape Designer, says. "It's a place where people can come and just disconnect from the outside world."

The rural destination is home to The Gardens at the Ridge, the independent garden retailer that specializes in native plants, organics and sustainable landscapes.

But, the shopping center features so much more than just a garden center: The Wild Flour Bakery, which concocts fresh, made-from-scratch bakery treats, cookies, pies and more daily, encourages customers to linger around the property longer.

The Café at The Ridge is the ideal family friendly restaurant, serving up breakfast, lunch and dinner, with everything from pancakes to chicken fried steak and other hearty meals on the menu.



“We really encourage customers to leave their phones in their car, just come on out and relax,” Kristi says “Our slogan is, ‘Come on home.’”

Kristi explains that they want customers to feel comfortable coming to the store just to hang out, like they’re at “grandma’s house.”



And The Ridge Marketplace boasts plenty of places of respite that customers can enjoy, including a gorgeous gathering area set up with picnic tables on an artificial lawn and seating and swings along the garden center’s expansive porch. “We want customers – once they get here – to stick around a while,” Kristi says. “They’ve driven out of their way to get here, so we try to give them a lot of reasons to just hang out, sit and chill.”

The entire property that The Ridge Marketplace, which is owned by Billy Long – no relation to Kristi, spans across is 7 to 8 acres. Collectively, the café, bakery and garden center occupy about 3 acres.

Kristi likens the whole experience to a “botanical garden amusement park,” as the property, including the garden center, is laid out to encourage customers to meander. There are no cookie-cutter rows of products and plants here – only small vignettes that give customers a taste of “home.”

Meticulously maintained demonstration gardens inspire customers to repeat the same look at home with the store’s selection of native, adaptive plants, while the silly faces carved into old oak tree stumps add a touch of whimsy to the whole experience. “Woodrow,” one of the more famous carvings, gets “dressed up” frequently to match the themes of events, displays or the seasons.



A large, walk-in chicken coop, what Kristi calls the “country club,” entertains customers for hours and reinforces that feeling of “coming home to grandma’s farm.”

The garden center has been open for about five years, with the café open just a little longer at six years. Sales have been steadily growing every year, including landscaping sales, which doubled year-over-year last year. “Our full-time crew is busy all the time,” says Kristi.



But Billy and Kristi don't concern themselves with how they can increase sales day-to-day – they're more focused on how they can improve customers' experiences at The Ridge Marketplace. "We always think about how we can create an experience that makes them say, 'Wow, that was amazing, I feel so good!'"

Being a part of Garden Centers of America (GCA) and Texas Nursery and Landscape Association (TNLA), as well as attending the IGC Shows, has helped Kristi breathe new life into the business with fresh ideas and ways to improve the in-store experience.

"I have to contribute part of my success here to the fact that there's GCA, TNLA and the IGC Shows as go-to resources," she says. "The education and resources from all these associations is really, really helpful to me."

Kristi especially points out the educational component of the IGC Shows as a huge help in refreshing her retail mindset every year.

"I always tell people in our industry that they have got to experience the IGC Show. The speakers are incredible. If I didn't buy a single thing on the trade show floor and all I did was attend the speakers' keynotes and educational sessions, it would be worth my trip."



She continues, "I wish I could go to every single one of them, because the speakers are always so good. I get a lot out of them."

A Work 'Family' Like No Other

The Gardens at The Ridge is Kerrville's destination for native, water-wise plants, which are perfectly suited for the tough growing climate of the Texas hill country. The adaptive, drought-tolerant native grasses, perennials and other plants are some of the garden retailer's best-sellers, along with succulents and trees.



The garden center pushes an organic, eco-conscious path to its customers to ensure they will be successful green thumbs in the environment that can be very hostile for gardening. Not only will these native species survive and thrive in this type of environment, they also are low maintenance, cost efficient and adaptive to their surroundings.

“The best way for us to garden successfully is to use the native plants,” Kristi says. “They’re the toughest plants. We use things that we believe our customers can be successful with.”

The staff at The Gardens instills this sustainable-landscape mindset into customers, because water supply is low in the area, and Kristi wants everyone to understand that it is a limited resource. They also encourage customers to grow their plants with organic methods.

Kristi, a Texas Certified Nursery Professional, loves her job – she doesn’t consider it “work.” “It really, truly is my home away from home,” she says. “I still feel so very, very blessed, because there’s so few people who love to go to work every day, and I can genuinely say I do, and I know that the majority of my staff feels the same way.”



Kristi stumbled upon her position with The Gardens by chance, attributing the incredible opportunity to a higher power. “It’s a total, complete God thing. I’m pretty sure he had his hands in this whole thing.”

She moved to Dallas in 2004 and pursued landscaping, but after the recession hit, she came back to her hometown of Kerrville. “I was kind of bored, because I had gotten used to the fast pace of the landscape business in Dallas,” Kristi says. “I was really contemplating just selling all my land and my home, and moving back to north Texas.”

But God had a different plan for her. While she was attending a TNLA convention, she ran into Billy in an elevator. Small talk ensued until the elevator ride was over, and Kristi didn’t think much of it. Later, when she was in a meeting, she noticed the man she met in the elevator was also in attendance.



After he noticed her name tag and realized who she was, Billy said, “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Of course, Kristi laughed in response, but Billy reassured her that he had been searching for her for two years. She explains, “He told me he bought this property in Kerrville and heard that I had come back to town, but he was never able to find me. He explained what he had in mind for a roadside retail stand, and he

wanted me to run the project.”

She firmly believes that fateful day in the elevator was the best thing that ever happened.

“Truly, it was a life-changing thing for me,” Kristi says. “I love retail, and I love this garden center. As much as I like the landscape side of the industry, my heart is in the garden center. I love the customers who come in, and I love interacting with them and showing them all that they can accomplish.”

That love extends to her staff, whom Kristi describes as “family.”

“Billy is more like my family,” Kristi says. “We’re all family, and that’s how we work. We all are passionate about the marketplace, its success and where it’s going.”

