

## RETAIL SPOTLIGHT

AN INSIDE VIEW OF THE  
RETAIL STORES AND  
STAFF THAT COMPRISE  
OUR GLOBAL INDUSTRY



The Indoor Outdoor Gardener team (left to right): Bayardo Zelaya, Eva Landy, Oscar Garcia and Helena De Paola.

# INDOOR OUTDOOR GARDENER

Even though the owners of Indoor Outdoor Gardener didn't have any prior business experience when they opened up their store, they did have a dream to run a one-stop gardening shop. Here's how they achieved that dream...

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The Indoor Outdoor Gardener, which opened in 1974, remains the only storefront garden center in New York City. Co-founder Helena De Paola opened the store alongside her husband, Peter. They were both teachers at the time, but they eventually grew their hobby into a complete, one-stop gardening shop that now sells not just indoor plants, but accessories for both indoor and outdoor growing as well.

HELENA AND PETER ACHIEVED THEIR BUSINESS GOALS PARTLY BY BUYING ALL OF THEIR PLANTS DIRECTLY FROM GROWERS, AND MANY ACCESSORIES DIRECTLY FROM MANUFACTURERS."



"Before opening, my husband Peter and I were teachers and going for our Ph.Ds in linguistics. Indoor gardening was our hobby, and we had over 400 plants growing under fluorescent lights in our basement. Opening a store was a deep-seeded dream, and when we saw that a plant store was opening in our neighborhood, we decided to make our dream become a reality. Six weeks later, without any prior business experience, we opened on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. We had one part-time employee who handled customers. We were the 'other two employees' who worked after our teaching jobs," shared Helena. "In the beginning, we were strictly an indoor plant store, and we sold plants, pots, fertilizers and pesticides, and we kept on adding more accessories in order to become a one-stop shop."

Just three years after opening, Helena and Peter opened a wholesale company at a separate location, and in 1980 opened a second store in the same neighborhood. They decided to close both in 1985 to concentrate on one location. "Lower overhead allowed us to lower our prices and consequently, do more volume," Helena explained. After years of continued success, Helena and Peter bought their building outright in 1990.

Aside from the constant need for more space, juggling full-time careers as teachers while keeping their store open



Oscar Garcia, Eva Landy, Helena De Paola and Bayardo Zelaya

seven days a week proved to be the most challenging aspect for Helena and Paul in the beginning. “We had to learn to juggle our time and keep our sanity, and rob Peter to pay Paul,” said Helena.

An unrelenting approach to doing business early on was key to their success today. “In the 70s, many indoor plant shops opened up after us, and we knew that we had to have the lowest prices [and] the best quality, and to fulfill our dream of carrying all supplies for the hobbyist, we had to become the best store in the neighborhood,” said Helena. “We pride ourselves in carrying everything you read about but can’t find anywhere, and our philosophy has always been having the lowest prices and the best quality. Our strengths are our knowledge. We don’t just sell; we educate and our hands-on experience allows our success to be our customers’ success. And our customers (some of which are second generation) trust us completely.”

Helena and Peter achieved their business goals partly by buying all of their plants directly from growers, and many accessories directly from manufacturers. They also hosted free plant classes in their home, and were featured in the local newspaper several times. They also contributed a gardening column for two years to generate public interest. It worked, and business grew and grew.

[HELENA’S] BEST ADVICE FOR OTHER SHOP OWNERS IS TO KEEP ABREAST OF ALL THE NEW PRODUCTS IN THE INDUSTRY.”

“As the industry grew, so did we. Beginning in 1990, in addition to all our indoor and outdoor plants and accessories, we started carrying a full line of hydroponics, all

types of high-tech lighting, nutrients and pesticides. We then began specializing in organic products. When our customers ask for something, we either start to carry it or we special order it. We never say, ‘No, we don’t carry it.’”

These days, Helena runs the store with her daughter Eva Landy; Peter passed away in 2006. Including Helena and Eva, the current staff includes two full-time employees and one part-time employee. Each staff member has a specific area of expertise. The manager, Bobby, is the irrigation king, while Oscar is the mechanical king. Eva knows the most about high-tech equipment and Helena specializes in indoor and outdoor plants.

“It was Peter who developed our own indoor and outdoor potting soil mix called Peter’s and Helena’s Potting Soiling, and it was Peter who put together a complete irrigation section and it was Peter who labored night after night learning all about high-tech lighting and the art of hydroponics,” says Helena about her husband’s legacy.

Being in the business for as long as she has, Helena has a lot of experience when it comes to marketing, but nothing was more effective than an event 20 years ago that brought in tons

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of business. “In 1984, a Vietnam veteran parked himself in front of our store and threatened to blow himself up with the bomb he was supposedly carrying. From 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., he was there and finally the SWAT team captured him. Peter gave the media a blow-by-blow account of what the would-be bomber was saying. Peter and I were both on television and all the local and city newspapers were full of pictures of us and the store. This incident gave us fantastic free publicity, and hundreds of potential customers came to check us out.”

After several years in the industry (and four children later), Helena has learned a thing or two, and she continues to stay on top of new product developments. Her best advice for other shop owners is to keep abreast of all the new products in the industry.

“Green is getting greener,” she says. “The more we know, the more we can sell. Never be embarrassed to say, ‘I don’t know.’”



WELCOME YOUR CUSTOMERS AND SERVE THEM WELL WITH HONESTY, PATIENCE AND PLENTY OF FREE ADVICE.”

And do say, ‘I will be glad to research it for you.’ And never take your business for granted. One boss should always be in the store. We believe the customer always comes first because they are your bread and butter. Welcome your customers and serve them well with honesty, patience and plenty of free advice. Take nothing for granted. If you don’t know your product well, you won’t have confidence and your customers can sense that. Our industry is growing faster than most. In order to be a part of it, you must love it and be excited about it and always be extremely knowledgeable about your products.

“All supplies for the hobbyist and plenty of free advice’ has been, and still is, our motto. Why? Because Peter and I never wanted our customers to have to go to several stores as we had to do to find what we needed. Furthermore, giving plenty of free advice makes our customers become successful. In sum, we want our success to be their success.”

The Indoor Outdoor Gardener remains on 5<sup>th</sup> Street in Brooklyn, New York, but is now bigger than ever, consisting of three levels: the basement and top floor for stock, the first floor for the storefront and an outdoor nursery where customers can enjoy wonderful music and choose from a selection of outdoor plants like veggies, herbs, annuals, perennials, roses and evergreens.

“We are the only storefront garden center in the entire city on New York,” says Helena, who, in 2012, won a local Top Professional Women in Business award. “And, everyone is amazed at our fig tree grown hydroponically first under LED lights and then under HID lights. How sweet the figs are.”

The Indoor Outdoor Gardener is located at 8223 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. in Brooklyn, New York. Staff can be reached by calling 1-718-836-2402 or sending email to [hydroponicsnyc@aol.com](mailto:hydroponicsnyc@aol.com) 