



A Kathan Gardens Christmas

Trees, wreaths, pine bough decorations — a garden center is a nice place to be during the holidays. What makes it even nicer: Newport's Kathan Gardens is a family-owned operation that will be celebrating its 70th birthday in 2013.

BY *John Walters*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Tom McNeill*

If you're a fan of poinsettias, there's a place you need to see. It's the front greenhouse at Kathan Gardens, about a mile west of downtown Newport. Every Christmas season, it's packed with poinsettias in a stunning array of colors, some natural, some not. Many are dusted with glitter or fake snow. And then there's the tie-dye special — a multicolored poinsettia that's perfect for the Grateful Dead fan on your shopping list.

Some of these effects are created in "the lab", a small workspace behind the greenhouse. "This is ethanol-based dye," explains Dennis Kathan, owner and chief plant wrangler of Kathan Gardens. "People say, 'How can you spray them? Doesn't it kill them?' It dries so fast, it doesn't." The tie-dyed poinsettias, Dennis explains, are "different color dyes dripped on the leaves."

There's more than just poinsettias to a Kathan Gardens Christmas. There are plenty of trees, wreaths, pine bough decorations and tons of pine greens grown on Kathan property just across the street.

"Christmas is my time," says Dennis' wife, Jill, who runs the gift shop and spends her holiday season custom decorating wreaths and tying "hundreds and hundreds of bows. People have us make bows for everything you can imagine. We make bows nonstop."

It all ends with a bang on Dec. 26, when everything goes on sale for 50 percent off. "People go crazy!" laughs Jill. "It really is fun! It's the biggest day of the Christmas season." The biggest day is also the last; after the 26th, Kathan Gardens goes into hibernation until late winter.

Christmas is a festive season at Kathan Gardens, and it provides a nice boost at a time when nobody's doing any gardening. But it only accounts for about 20 percent of Kathan Gardens' sales. So let's explore the rest of this family-owned operation that will be celebrating its 70th birthday in 2013.

Salt of the earth

If you walk from the front greenhouse through the lab, you'll come to >>>>



Dennis and Jill Kathan, owners
of Kathan Gardens in Newport



Daisy the cat keeps an eye on activity in the greenhouse.

a dark, moist room that smells of soil. This unglamorous space may be the heart of the whole operation: it's where Kathan Gardens makes its own brand of soil, "one of the things we're known for," says Jill. "Our soil is a huge reason why our plants do so well, and people come and buy bags of soil like it's gold."

The nongardener might think it's just dirt, but making the soil is a surprisingly complicated process. "We buy loam, and we add compost," explains Dennis. "And then we mix it with peat moss and sand. And then we steam pasteurize it — just like maple sugaring time. Except it's a soil smell instead of maple. But the soil smell is nice, too."

Learn More

Visit Kathan Gardens at 146 Elm Street in Newport, or online at www.kathangardens.com

The steaming kills unwanted weed seeds and diseases that linger in untreated soils. After that, says Dennis, "we mix it with more peat moss. We adjust the pH and add a time-release fertilizer. And that's our base soil."

The recipe was first developed by Dennis' father, Oliver, who founded the business in 1953. The soil has made Kathan Gardens a must for serious gardeners. "When we open in March, the first customers are making a beeline to buy our soil," says Dennis.

A business and a home

How long is your daily commute? If you're Dennis or Jill Kathan, it's about a 100-foot walk; their home is directly behind the gift shop. Employees often drop in to ask questions. And sometimes a customer walks through their front door, thinking the house is part of the gift shop. Understandable, since the Kathans use their "front yard"

as a display space for outdoor furniture and décor. The setting isn't conducive to privacy, but the Kathans are used to it. "It's a fishbowl, and it's hard to separate where work ends and the rest of life begins," says Dennis. "I think we have pretty good balance, though."

It probably helps that Dennis and Jill's parents were prominent local merchants. Jill's family owned Woodhall's Market, later renamed Violette's Supermarket, "an icon in the community for a long time," says Dennis. (Violette's recently re-opened under the ownership of Dana and Dodi Violette, Jill's brother and his wife.)

Oliver's father operated a plant nursery in Walpole. After serving in World War II, Oliver studied horticulture under the GI Bill at the University of New Hampshire. He married Anne, who grew up with him in Walpole, and they moved to Wendell, a small village



Justin Westover helps a customer pick out and trim a Christmas tree.

between Newport and Claremont. “They started landscaping, and built the first small greenhouse,” says Dennis. They first opened in 1953; two years later, they moved to the current location in Newport. “And I was born in 1956 and came home here [from the hospital], so this has been my house for my entire life.”

Oliver and Anne had a large piece of land — 13 acres on one side of Elm Street and 23 more on the other — and, over time, built a total of 16 greenhouses. Dennis grew up working in the business, studied at UNH (like his father), and met his future wife there. Then, Dennis and Jill returned to Newport and went to work with his parents. “It was just a good opportunity,” says Dennis. “I knew this really well, and there was tremendous growth in the industry at the time.”

“And this was our hometown,”

adds Jill. “We both wanted to stay here.”

The senior Kathans handed the reins to Dennis and Jill in 1988, but “they continued to participate, just gradually retiring,” explains Dennis. “It was perfect for them. They got to stay and do as much as they wanted.” They still help out from time to time.

Their family heritage may explain the Kathans’ dedication to their hometown. They maintain planters at the town’s “Welcome to Newport” signs, provide seasonal arrangements for window boxes and flowerpots along Main Street, and maintain Wilmarth Place, a historic site in the middle of downtown. “Part of being in a community like Newport, there’s a lot of giving back and being involved,” says Dennis.

“Oh, yeah, it’s a nice community,” adds Jill.

“It’s meant a lot to us,” says

Dennis. (They often finish each other’s sentences in rapid-fire fashion.)

The sense of family and community extends to their employees. “We tend to hold on to people,” says Dennis. Their three core staffers — Justin Westover (the chief poinsettia painter), Emily Colby and Cody Pollari — have worked for the Kathans for a total of 27 years. And many of the seasonal part-timers have returned to the gardens every spring for 20 to 30 years.

Embracing the seasonality

There’s a real ebb and flow to running a garden center. After the winter closing, business slowly ramps up in the early spring. The peak months are May and June, when the Kathans are often working seven days a week. Things begin to slow down in late summer, until preparations for the Christmas season begin. And then, from mid-November through Dec. 26, it’s all out for >>>>>

MJ HARRINGTON & CO.

Jewelers & Designers
Since 1948

The
Beauty
of the Season



33 MAIN STREET • NEWPORT, NH • 603.863.1662

www.mjharrington.com



the holidays.

“You need to embrace the seasonality, or you’re eaten up by it,” says Dennis. “When you’re busy, it’s all consuming. Every minute that we can work, the more successful we will be.”

Even in the slow times, there’s always work to do. They have to restock their inventory for future seasons. In the winter, the store is closed but there are plenty of chores to do: “There’s tremendous snow to deal with, and there’s ordering,” says Dennis. “The Christmas shop gets totally cleaned up, and loads of new product come in. When people come in the spring, it’s all ready.”

Changing with the times

A garden center might look like an unchanging oasis, but the Kathans have seen plenty of changes over the years. One big change began in the early 1990s, when Jill took on a bigger role in the business. Since then, she’s built up the gift shop as a major attraction and revenue producer.

“It used to be just pots and soil and supplies,” Jill says. “When the kids were small, I started painting birdhouses. I can’t tell you how many birdhouses I painted! And then I found I could sell anything” — she and Dennis share a laugh — “and it was really fun!”

“She found that a lot of people liked what she liked,” adds Dennis.

The gift shop changes almost entirely with the seasons; this time of year, there’s plenty of merchandise with winter or holiday themes. Jill puts a lot of energy into finding the right mix of items. There’s a comfy, rustic vibe to the shop. “That’s what people want right now,” she says. “They want things that have a homey feeling.”

There have been plenty of changes to the garden side of the business as well. These days, many of their customers are too busy to immerse themselves in gardening. “People don’t buy as many flats of plants anymore,” says Dennis. But they still appreciate



Salt Hill Pubs, where Joe and Josh Tuohy have been offering their inspired blend of honest food, perfect pints, good humor and living music since 2003.

We are a family catering to families and grateful for the friends who keep coming back and bringing us more friends to impress. Please check out our extensive catering menu. Up Galway! Open 7 days a week, because your appetite doesn’t take a day off.

Newport: 863-7774 Lebanon: 448-4532
Hanover: 676-7855

www.salthillpub.com for the latest news and entertainment

Salt Hill Newport: Site of the Winter Carnival Strong Man Competition and the hub of post-event gatherings!



having a garden. “One of the things that Dennis does is he plants containers,” says Jill. “He does great combinations of colors and plants and sizes.”

Dennis continues. “People bring in their planters, their window boxes, I plant them, they come and pick them up.”

Back to Jill: “You have to change with the times. That’s how you survive. And Dennis, being a good businessman, that’s what he’s done.”

Dennis, for his part, credits Jill for keeping Kathan Gardens strong. “If Jill hadn’t worked into the business when she did, I don’t know if we’d still be here. In addition to the gift shop, we sell wicker furniture, statuary and garden art, trellises and different outdoor things. It’s a pretty good-sized chunk of our business. And I don’t know that I would have had the skills to develop that.”

A fruitful life

Running the business can be tough, but there are rewards aplenty. “You know, I worked a lot, but I saw my kids more than anybody!” says Dennis. “I would take ‘em to school every day. And if they came home, we’d have lunch together. So it was really an amazing place to raise children, because they could be with you, hanging out and being part of it.”

And a garden center is just a nice place to be. “People are generally happy when they’re here,” says Dennis. “When they come in the springtime, they can feel it is spring. In November, they suddenly realize that Christmas is coming; the place smells like balsam, and it’s decorated and everything is beautiful. We don’t have very many people who HAVE to be here. They WANT to be here.”

“I always say that we can delight all your senses,” adds Jill. “Really truly. You can come and have all your senses be happy.”

And, while you’re there, you can pick up a tie-dyed poinsettia. **K**

Keep your warmth. Not your sweat.

Hubert's
40 Years of Providing the Best for less!
1972-2012

Family Outfitters

Newport • Claremont • New London
Woodsville • Lebanon •
Peterborough • Goffstown
www.huberts.com

Columbia
Trying stuff since 1891

Business banking that revolves around you.

From retail to manufacturing, and everything in between, Sugar River Bank's Business Banking Center specializes in using a team approach to help businesses, large or small. And we're right here at your hometown bank.

- COMMERCIAL DEPOSITS
- ACH CASH MANAGEMENT
- SBA APPROVED LOANS
- COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE
- BUSINESS LINES OF CREDIT
- TERM LOANS
- COMPETITIVE RATES
- AND MORE

Sugar River Bank
Business Banking Center

Newport | Grantham | New London | Sunapee | Warner | 800-562-3145 | sugarriverbank.com | Member FDIC | EQUAL HOUSING LENDER