

# Buffalo Spree

The Magazine of Western New York

faces of home By Donna Hoke

DECEMBER 2015

## KATHRYN O'DONNELL and the world of indoor plants

*for* the past forty years, award-winning designer and born entrepreneur Kathryn O'Donnell has shepherded her business, Botanicus, through changes in green consciousness, design, plant trends, even weather. Now primarily involved with indoor landscape installation and service, O'Donnell, a registered Green Plants for Green Buildings Trainer, has emerged as Western New York's definitive expert on interior greenery, but her reputation and pragmatic know-how is in demand even beyond our region.

**Buffalo Spree:** *Tell us how it all began.*

**Kathryn O'Donnell:** In 1971, my former husband decided that we should have a store that sold only plants. He'd just gotten back from Vietnam, where he'd known people from California who had done this; in Buffalo, there was no such thing, and that was a revolutionary idea. We endeavored to read all the information we could get from Cornell about how to grow indoor plants and started experimenting.

*Did either of you know anything about plants or love them?*

It wasn't "I love plants," it was "Let's start a business." We're lifelong learners. He went every week to

the library and got twelve to twenty books, and read all the basics and what people said about plants. It was a giant research and development project, which I consider it to be now, as well. I'm an entrepreneur and I happen to be in the plant business. That's why it continues to be a successful business from retail to wholesale greenhouse to Florida manufacturing to commercial service. You decide what you're going to do and move forward; your success is earned as much by what didn't work and moving quickly on what is successful. I tried the internet for silk plants, and it was quite successful for the first couple of years but as with any entrepreneurial venture, when everything turns around, you have to react.

*So what was the first step?*

We started with a plant store on Main Street in Buffalo and had a little greenhouse in the University District. We sold the Cornell mix of peat moss and Perlite to people who wanted to try growing houseplants. We ended up with three retail stores—the one on Main, in Clarence, and in Orchard Park. We developed plantmaster courses and charged five dollars for five visits. Hundreds of people came and learned the basics of plant care. For every plant we sold, we wrote out the instructions—the name of the plant, ideal lighting, ideal watering, basic trimming, and insect and disease prevention.



Botanicus founder Kathryn O'Donnell

*That's amazing customer service. It's no wonder you were succeeding. How did the business begin to morph?*

While we were doing the retail stores, we couldn't find anyone who grew plants for the indoor market. You could go to Florida, [but that was inconvenient], so we had an acre of greenhouses in Lockport where we grew plants and started propagating plants to make terrariums—terrariums and sand paintings were big in the seventies.



We also learned you could import bonsai and cactus from Japan, so [we got a loan] and started importing and wholesaling from Buffalo all the way to Albany. Lots of other little plant stores were cropping up, and we stocked their stores with cactus and little terrarium plants. We grew African violets and every kind of ivy known to man, and then we realized people wanted bigger plants. We brought little plants from Florida, but there was an oil embargo in the seventies and we were using 2,000 gallons of fuel a month and finally we thought maybe this isn't the best place to grow tropical plants. So we set up a twenty-eight acre nursery in Florida to grow plants from six inches to ficus up to thirty feet tall.

*Today, you mostly install and oversee indoor gardens. When did that transition happen?*

After we had these stores and the nursery, people like the Turgeon brothers were setting up restaurants, and they asked us to come and put plants in their restaurants. At that time, restaurants were filled with plants. The Turgeons had seven or eight restaurants, so now we had a

situation we could learn from: what worked for a long time in an indoor environment, because with retail, you sell it and somebody else takes care of it. In commercial, you take care of it yourself and learn a lot from the plant.

But also, in the eighties, women who had 150 plants in their homes got jobs, and fewer people were buying plants in retail stores. They were becoming more widely available in floral shops and garden centers, and Florida had developed a whole industry of growing indoor plants, not like when we started. So we closed our last retail store in 1986, and moved to a warehouse and did more and more commercial work and some residential. We did the plants at the Thruway Mall, the first indoor mall in Western New York; the Winter Garden in Niagara Falls before they got rid of them; and little offices that just wanted beautiful plants in their reception areas. We had twenty or thirty accounts, and now have over 300 in Buffalo and Rochester and take care of 50,000 plants a week.

*It sounds like every idea just led to more ideas! But it also sounds like an incredible amount of work. What obstacles did you*

*encounter along the way?*

The blizzard of '77. Our glass greenhouses in Lockport collapsed. The week before, there was a terrible freeze in Florida, and all the plants froze. The retail store in Orchard Park was closed for three weeks, and a tech had to go out on a snowmobile to water the plants. It took us years to get out of debt from that.

By 1983, [I was no longer with my husband], I had two teenage daughters, a nursery in Florida, two retail stores, and a commercial division, and had to commute to Florida one week a month to run the nursery. There was a real estate crisis in Florida; I couldn't sell it even if I wanted to, so I kept it running until I could sell it and pay off my debt from running all these businesses.

*What has been the competition been like through the years?*

It varied from massive amounts of competition to no competition, but the biggest competition is the economy and recessions, because plants are a luxury. Also changes in attitude in the design community; that's why right now there is an opportunity to change that perception. If you look at

the past couple years of casinos in Las Vegas, they had bronze trees—not a live plant in the whole place; the design community has a tremendous effect. But this business is growing now; there's tremendous opportunity with what I consider the new renaissance indoors. We're really back to the seventies where we're growing terrariums up the walls and calling them vertical gardens.

*What is a typical day like for you?*

I have developed some excellent systems to run the company so I don't have to do much of day-to-day work. A few years ago, I broke my leg and couldn't walk for four months, and everything ran pretty well. I mostly work in sales and designing new installs.

*You've won seven design awards this year for new installs. Where do your design skills come from?*

I'm basically self-taught. I was nineteen when I got married; I didn't have time for college, but I'm a lifelong learner and love to learn new things, whether management or design or technology. I grew up figure skating

and, before I was in the plant business, I had another business—I did some dressmaking and made a lot of costume skating dresses for the kids from Buffalo Skating Club. At the time, there wasn't great Lycra fabric so you had to custom fit. That's taking something two-dimensional and making it three-dimensional, which is basic design criteria—taking a blueprint and making it come to life. I also do photography, which has been a great help because I can take the pictures.

As a lifelong learner, I have diverse interests. I also do Bikram yoga to keep sane; I've been doing it for fifteen years. I've also spent the past twenty years going to Toastmasters, an international speaking club. You've got to balance your life.

*What are you learning now?*

I keep up on all the major business books and with all the LinkedIn groups that specialize in vertical gardening. It's exploding and so many companies are figuring out ways to have it be more available at less cost to everyone, so I've been intent on keeping up on that. I try to read

different business blogs and what technology can be used to make everybody's life easier.

*How old are your children now? Are they involved in the business?*

They're both in their forties, and I have four adorable grandchildren. From the time they were little, they had to bag soil and do sand painting and terrariums and accounting and bookkeeping and write programs. Now one does custom software programming, and the other has her own HR consulting practice.

*Last question: what plants do you have in your house?*

I have very few plants at home. I love to travel. I do an annual calendar of photography for customers and it's usually travel-oriented. I love my grandkids and daughters, and I like to spend time with them. I have kept a saltwater tank for twenty-five years and that's enough. I get to see and am involved with plants at all these companies and that's my success—watching how fabulously they do. ■

*Donna Hoke is the editor of Spree Home.*





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