

The Sky's The Limit

Retail Rising Star Award winner Steve McShane pulls out all the stops to create a garden center, nursery, and landscape destination.

By Richard Jones
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It's not often you'll see a retailer that's just reaching its second anniversary featured on the cover of *Today's Garden Center*. Success stories generally take a little more seasoning. But McShane's Nursery & Landscape Supply in Salinas, Calif., isn't your typical garden center start-up, and owner and general manager Steve McShane isn't your typical retailer.

For starters, McShane was recognized as one of the most promising new members of the industry as the winner of the 2008 Retail Rising Star Award at ANLA's Management Clinic in Louisville last month (see Retail Rising Star sidebar).

But more than that, McShane's the business is a reflection of McShane the owner: exciting, aggressive, and always on the go, overlooking no opportunity to show customers what's possible.

Taking The Leap

Had things gone a little differently, Steve McShane might still be a rising star in the produce industry. Much of his early career was spent with large Salinas-area vegetable companies Taylor Farms (as product manager) and New Star Fresh Foods (directing food safety, quality, and new product development).

"But, many times I thought about how I'd like to own my own business someday," McShane says. And when the opportunity arose, he was ready.

"In the fall of 2005 I learned that one of the two local garden centers in this area might be for sale. Even better a local business man was willing to partner with me." A Master Gardener with a degree in soil science and a work experience in nurseries dating back to high school, McShane found his interest piqued by the possibility. "In the back of my mind I was wondering if this was my calling," he says.

Just a few weeks later, in November 2005, McShane found himself in a networking event at the Produce Marketing Association Expo in Atlanta, when someone asked him, "Are you doing what you love? Are you satisfied with your life?"

"I thought, 'Maybe this really is my opportunity,'" he says. It didn't take long to decide he was ready to make the leap.

“I found myself writing a business plan on a napkin on the flight home,” he says. “I gave my two weeks notice at New Star, and the deal closed on December 16th.” –STRIKE - following Monday began work at the nursery. The deal closed on December 16.”

Step By Step

As fast as that happened, McShane’s work was only beginning. The nursery he had just purchased, Graeber Gardens, already had a half-century of history in Salinas, but the opportunity was there for some major upgrades. In addition to putting together a plant mix that included annuals, perennials, shrubs, ornamental and fruit trees, and native plants, McShane’s goal was to bring together all facets of what his customers would need to create the outdoor experience they wanted. He immediately put in place a three-phase plan for creating a regional destination incorporating garden center, nursery, and landscape.

Phase I – which included power, water, and gas upgrades, improved site drainage, remodeling the showroom, new paint, a new office trailer, repositioning the production greenhouse, renovation of the demonstration garden and the fountain/statuary area, and additional dry storage – amazingly was completed when McShane’s opened its doors for business only a month later, on January 18, 2006.

Phase II – expansion into landscape supply by purchasing a neighboring soils, bark, and rock company – was complete just three months later.

Phase III – renovating the nursery and entry to include a covered walk/entry, a new Nexus greenhouse structure, and a working West-Texas style windmill – was completed half way into the second year of operations. By the close of year two, McShane’s added a paved parking lot for more than 70 cars. was also complete within the first year of operation. While McShane says the other features are critical to the success of the business, he almost seems more excited about the windmill. “It was a big investment, but it really creates excitement with the community,” he says. “People drive by and see that and they really react to it.”

All of that investment is paying off. From 2006 to 2007, the operation saw a 20% increase in gross revenue. And even with an uncertain economy in 2008, McShane is setting his target at another 10% increase.

As you might expect, however, McShane’s isn’t resting on its laurels and expecting the additional money to flow in on its own. Water gardening will be a new focus this year, and other recent additions to the business have included a concrete batch plant and the acquisition of a nearby masonry supply. “We’re blurring the lines between nursery and landscape,” he says.

The business is in the process of using these new materials to create a demonstration area on the nursery grounds. “We’re building a meandering path in a garden environment. It will be 90 feet long and 8 feet high. We really want to show the client what they can do; bring them to what’s possible.”

‘Never-ending Improvement’

McShane will tell you that the success of his business to this point has been as much about people as it has about construction and remodeling. “More than anything, the

people in the industry have welcomed me with open arms,” he says. “ANLA, the California Association of Nurseries and Garden Centers (CANGC), Master Nursery – if it wasn’t for them this wouldn’t be possible. I haven’t seen anything like this in other industries.”

And he gives back as well, both to the industry and the community that supports his business. In addition to being an active member of ANLA, CANGC, and Master Nursery. McShane is active in Farm Bureau, serving on the National Board of Young Farmers and Ranchers. He served a term on the local community college board, and he’s active in both Rotary and the Jaycees.

“Steve is a person with a lot of vision. He makes the garden center a fun experience for both his employees and his customers,” says Meghan Dresselhaus, formerly retail manager for McShane’s, and now in charge of membership support in the Southwest region for Master Nursery.

“He’ll get on the loudspeaker and announce a customer who just walked into the garden center and tell everyone about their most recent accomplishment. And from a management standpoint, Steve understands what it means to empower people. He gives them responsibility and watches them flourish. He gives you the feedback to keep you going,” she says.

“From day one, my vision was to be the best in the Monterey Bay – but not really compared to other garden centers. We’re competing against ourselves,” McShane says. “My motto is, ‘Keep it movin.’ Constant, never-ending improvement.’ In the end, we want to give visitors the experience of discovering the wonder our garden center has to offer.” TGC

Sidebar:

McShane’s Nursery & Landscape Supply

Owner: Steve McShane

Location: Salinas, Calif.

Established: 2005

Size: 3 acres

Web Site: www.mcshanesnursery.com

Sidebar:

Retail Rising Star

Four years ago, ANLA’s Retail Board launched an award program – the Retail Rising Star – dedicated to recognizing the retail community’s up-and-coming leaders. Winners are honored not just for professional excellence, but also for a commitment to serving their community and the industry.

Several qualities are considered in selecting the Retail Rising Star winner, including innovation, leadership attributes of the individual, and the growth and dynamic of the retail operation. This year’s winner, Steve McShane, owner of McShane’s Nursery & Landscape Supply in Salinas, Calif., certainly fits the bill.

“Steve is he superbly qualified on all three of those fronts,” says Bill Jameson CEO of Master Nursery and member of ANLA’s Retail Board. “He’s new to the industry but he demonstrates all of the criteria of energy, enthusiasm, and excitement for his business and for the industry. He’s involved with a number of local and community events and groups, and he has great potential leadership abilities for the industry and certainly superb leadership abilities in his own garden center.”

Recognizing that leadership is not just about past accomplishments, but must also include an ongoing commitment to professional growth, ANLA teams with *Today’s Garden Center* and new sponsors Master Nursery and The Espoma Company to provide a scholarship prize with the award. McShane will receive a scholarship which includes registration, travel and accommodations for this summer’s ANLA Retail Roadshow and next year’s Management Clinic and ANLA Legislative Conference.