

## Retail Ready



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Garden center proves to be a fast-growing addition to landscape business

Schuren Nursery, Landscape & Garden Center opened its garden center business in St. Joseph, Ill., in 2007, and the garden center has experienced steady growth of 25 to 30 percent each year since. Owner Steve Schuren started his nursery and landscaping business in 1988 with a 5-acre growing operation that has expanded to 50 acres. Although landscaping represents about 70 percent of the \$1 million generated annually by the business, Schuren predicts strong growth in the retail segment.

Quality plants have been the lynchpin in Schuren's approach to landscaping from the design and construction end, wholesale to other landscapers and his more recent venture into retail sales. Managing schedules to meet customers' landscaping expectations despite weather and other challenges is a significant factor in his success.

"I always wanted a garden center," Schuren said. "I had looked for land for about 10 years, but it was just too expensive in any of the locations I wanted." Finding affordable land located near a metropolitan area, especially with interstate access, is no easy task. St. Joseph is located in east-central Illinois, about 7 miles east of Urbana-Champaign, home to the University of Illinois. The St. Joseph location offers easy access from Interstate 74 and a close proximity to Schuren's nursery growing site. Schuren's business is mostly within about a 50-mile radius.

Schuren's garden center features a wide variety of plants adapted to central Illinois seasons. While spring is the busiest time, the garden center remains open year-round with seasonal focuses throughout the year. Mary Kay Falker, garden center manager, noted that while initially customers were primarily local, customers are coming from farther away to purchase plants at Schuren's.

*Photos by Lee Riggs.*



Garden center staff maintains plants for best quality.



Steve Schuren and Mary Kay Falker discuss garden center growth.



Schuren landscaping is prevalent at the Stone Creek Builders Tour of Homes in Urbana.

## Growing plants

"We're a Proven Winners nursery," Schuren said. "Our liner supplier for Proven Winners shrubs is Spring Meadows Nursery, Grand Haven, Mich." He cited a number of advantages in his carrying Proven Winners. "The consistency in quality is important," he said. "The quality, name recognition and marketing with national advertising are all important." Liner supplier for trees is primarily Forrest Keeling Nursery in Elsberry, Mo. Finished stock supplier for shrubs is primarily Home Nursery in Edwardsville, Ill., and for trees, Wandell's Nursery in Urbana, Ill., and Zimmerman Farm Nursery in Clinton, Ind.

Most of Schuren's annuals are grown at the St. Joseph garden center greenhouse site from seeds, cuttings and plugs. Perennials are primarily grown from plugs. Plugs and cuttings are obtained from Eason Horticultural Resources, Inc. in Ft. Wright, Ky. A 2.5-acre pond at Schuren's growing site fed by runoff holds water that is moved by a gravity line to a .25-acre pond. Water is pumped from the pond for use in the overhead irrigation system.

Schuren noted that landscaping plant preferences have changed significantly over the past couple of decades. Improved cultivars have become available in the last few years and offer a wider range of choices to meet changing needs.

"Landscapers are looking for newer, improved varieties with more compact growth. They're interested in color and shape," Schuren said. "Lower maintenance is important." Schuren cited the increased interest in dwarf plants. The popular shrub weigela, for example, used to be offered in a 6 to 8-foot height, but are now available in increasingly shorter heights. Schuren said, "The Wine and Roses cultivar is about 5 feet, Fine Wine is 2 to 3 feet and the cultivars Midnight Wine and Minuet are about 18 inches."

## Business challenges

While growing plants, designing and installing landscapes and developing and maintaining a retail garden business are all interrelated, different challenges are present in the various segments. Schuren noted that time conflicts are particularly challenging in landscaping. Managing work schedules to meet customers' expectations can be especially difficult in unusually rainy springs, such as this past spring in which central Illinois experienced repeated heavy rainfalls. A number of landscape and general construction projects have been delayed by weather and row crop planting is running several weeks behind schedule.

"I may have 35 calls in one day from people wanting estimates. When the weather breaks, all 35 will expect to have their work done," Schuren said. He noted that it is usually impossible to start a project and work straight through to completion. "It would be nice, but we usually have to pull off because one location may be too wet while we can work off the concrete at another site."

Schuren employs 10 full-time workers year-round with a total of about 20 including part-time seasonal employees. "I try to keep at least one extra person for both landscaping and at the garden center," he said.

A New Jersey native, Schuren's first job was at an estate where more than 1,000 orchids were raised. "I learned so much at that job from the head gardener," Schuren said. After moving to Illinois, he worked for seven years in the lawn care industry as a lawn care technician for Biddle Lawn Care in Savoy. When he gave notice to his employer that he planned to leave to start a landscaping business, his employer negotiated with him to start a landscaping business for Biddle Lawn Care. Schuren managed landscaping for Biddle for another seven years before launching his own nursery and landscaping business.

He entered the landscaping business with extensive on-the-job training and knowledge acquired through independent landscape design study. "All the while I was working in lawn care and landscaping, I continued learning more about landscaping," Schuren said. He enrolled in classes through the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service and embarked on independent learning. "Faculty members at U of I horticulture and architectural landscape were just extremely helpful to me in learning landscaping techniques," he said.

Schuren completes a wide range of landscaping projects, with residential projects representing about 60 percent of the work, and commercial, about 40 percent. In addition to installing plants, shrubs and trees, Schuren installs bluegrass sod from a local sod supplier, Steffey Sod in St. Joseph, as well as extensive mulch installation, and hydroseeding with a Finn hydroseeder. Schuren completion about a dozen residential patios on average each year. Current projects include installing a paved labyrinth with landscaping at the McKinley Foundation Church on the U of I campus.

Schuren's work is prominent among homes featured in the May 2009 Stone Creek Builders Tour of Homes in Urbana. Schuren landscaped four of six homes on Stone Creek Blvd., and his firm planted about 1,000 trees at Stone Creek Golf Course when it was constructed and recently landscaped a mall-office complex

near the Stone Creek Development.

While improvements in equipment and cultivars have added more choices in landscaping, Schuren cited a number of challenges to the green industry business. "Regulations and tax issues are major concerns," he said. "That's why organizations such as Illinois Green Industry Association are so important to try to work on issues that are important to the industry," he said.

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