

Roots That Run Deep



Local nursery and home decor center Roger's Gardens celebrates a milestone anniversary with a look at what has changed over the years as well as tips on incorporating current backyard trends.

By ASHLEY RYAN

From vibrant roses in an array of colors, juicy tomatoes and fragrant herbs used for cooking to native plants that support local bees and butterflies, the selection of flora at Roger's Gardens is unrivaled—just one of the reasons that this outdoor sanctuary has flourished over the last 50 years. But it's not simply the plantlife that draws visitors in. Scenic beauty, whimsical home decor, farm-to-table dining and moments of tranquility come together to create a space that is beloved amongst Newport Beach locals as well as garden enthusiasts from all over.

"We got tabbed on a cover of Nursery Magazine as America's most beautiful garden center and we've held onto that ever since," says owner Gavin Herbert Jr., who took over the business for his father in the mid-1990s.

This year, as the nursery commemorates this important milestone, Herbert reflects on the center's deep roots and storied history as well as what has changed along the way. With growth throughout many seasons, it has become a cornerstone of the gardening community and continues to thrive with beauty, quality and sustainability in mind.

Digging Into the Past

Herbert and his family—including his father, Gavin Herbert Sr.—moved to Newport Beach in 1960, arriving in a town that looks vastly different from the current landscape. A passionate gardener, his father befriended Roger McKinnon, owner of a small nursery on Fairview Road in Costa Mesa. "He would go over there every week and buy flowers—he was a big flower guy," the younger Herbert recalls.

In 1970, his father purchased the business from McKinnon and, in 1975, relocated it to its current location in Corona del Mar. "There was no San Miguel [Drive] going to Fashion Island," he says. "There was no Avocado [Avenue]. This was a pretty isolated area, open to new things."

But the expansion truly allowed the business to flourish, as the move took the gardens from roughly 1 acre to a sprawling 7. "When we first opened, more than half of our facility was planted," Herbert notes. "Most nurseries, you sell the stuff, you don't put it in the ground. ... [My father] built the sort of nursery he wanted to shop at. So, Roger's Gardens is really his vision of how he saw gardening back in 1975."

Over the years, Roger's Gardens has seen a number of iconic moments: Former President Ronald Reagan and John Wayne dedicated the flagpole at the center in 1980. Around the same time, it played host to the PBS television show "The Victory Garden." Martha Stewart visited, too, doing a book signing in 1991. Mossed hanging baskets were invented at the nursery. The gardens

are also home to Disneyland's original bandstand—originally on Main Street in the Anaheim theme park, but purchased by Herbert's father around the time they relocated to Corona del Mar—and, in 2020, they reintroduced the stunning Disneyland rose to America.

Herbert himself helped with the family business throughout his youth, then started his own lawn and garden manufacturing business, which he ran for about 20 years. In 1995, he stepped in as president and owner of Roger's Gardens in an effort to continue his family's legacy through a deep commitment to innovative gardening excellence.

"The best part about being a Roger's Garden employee is when you tell someone at a party that you're a Roger's Gardens employee," Herbert says. "Everybody's been here and they have nothing but wonderful things to say. ... To be a part of that makes me proud."

The gardens now serve nearly 1 million visitors each year, having elevated the experience to encompass everything from home decor, seasonal events and interactive workshops to open-air dining.

Thriving in Every Season

A flurry of unique additions are surely what have shaped the continued growth of Roger's Gardens. One of the most impactful decisions—dreamt up by Eric Cortina, the garden's long-time creative director, who retired two years ago after nearly four decades at the company—was to start incorporating home decor, specifically at Christmastime.

"He was brilliant. He was imaginative. He would push the envelopes," Herbert says. The holiday decor, which has been offered since the early 1990s, started to transform the business, with the center seeing roughly three times as many customers during Christmas than in the springtime. Buyers journey around the world to uncover unique artisanal pieces from makers in Poland, Germany and beyond, resulting in a stunning shop that showcases curated European decor, elegant themed trees and more than 800 styles of ornaments.

In the early 2000s, Roger's Gardens also unveiled a Halloween boutique, filled with artisan collectibles, intricate sets and spooky storytelling that enhances the immersive shopping experience. But in addition to decor, the garden offers patio furniture,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROGER'S GARDENS

jewelry and even fine art paintings by John Cosby, some valued at more than \$10,000.

Sustainability has also become a focus in recent years, with Roger's Gardens eliminating the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides in 2005 and launching the Plants Not Plastics campaign in 2019 to reduce plastic waste in the area. The center also introduced the California Friendly Garden Contest, now called the WaterSmart Landscape Contest, in an effort to reward water-efficient landscapes.

"We've evolved from a traditional nursery into a premier destination for gardening, home decor and seasonal experiences," says Nava Rezvan, director of marketing and public relations. "And the core values of the city, the community and nature remain, but it's now offered as a more curated, inspirational and lifestyle-driven experience."

The addition of Farmhouse at Roger's Gardens in 2016 elevated the shopping experience further, offering visitors the chance to dine on fresh fare in a picturesque setting. "We knew we wanted to do farm-to-table and we were very fortunate to find perhaps the grandfather of farm-to-table in chef Rich Mead," Herbert says. Mead visits the Santa Monica Farmers Market each Wednesday to ensure his ingredients are fresh and perfectly in-season, aligning with the nursery's values on sustainability and community. Roger's Gardens also provides seasonal decor for the restaurant.

Now, as they look to the future, Herbert and his team continue to redefine their limits. Current initiatives will expand e-commerce offerings, which already include more than 5,000 products available on the Roger's Garden website, as well as better utilize the center's space with private events that can accommodate up to 120 people, an effort that just launched this spring.

"The imagination here—the creativity, the collaboration and the cooperation—is really cool," Herbert adds.

Backyard Blooms

Collaboration at Roger's Gardens extends beyond the team, reaching out into the community in many different ways.

Roughly half of the products sold at the gardens are imported. "We like original products from Poland, from Germany, from England," Herbert reveals. "... We also like to find station wagon vendors—guys who show up in their station wagon and we buy everything in their car. It's a good way to get



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROGER'S GARDENS

unique, one-of-a-kind items."

These varied offerings are further enhanced by workshops that showcase how guests can integrate these products into their own gardens. And with seasonal events such as Tomatomania!, Everything Herbs and Fall is for Planting, Roger's Gardens provides everything visitors need to create the garden of their dreams at home.

"The coastal environment gives us the cool air, so we're able to grow things and keep things blooming much longer than, say, in Irvine or even in El Toro," he explains. "... You go inland 2 miles and it's 85 [degrees] and, right here, 72. That's a whole different climate for growing."

Herbert says that English cottage gardens remained popular into the early 2000s but, now, drought-tolerant plants and products that don't take as much water are more sought-after. "When you think about it, Southern California is a desert and yet we plant it lushly with all sorts of plants that



need to be tended and mowed. It creates all this green waste." Current gardeners strive for a balance, he says, with more native plants as well as those that add a pop of color.

Another trend he's recognized in recent years is the desire to convert backyards into outdoor living rooms. "People want the extension from indoor living to outdoor living," Herbert notes. "So we're seeing more trellises, more fire pits, smaller pools, maybe just a Jacuzzi with a water feature. They really want to have a life well-lived."

Habitat and edible gardening are also thriving in Orange County, with locals selecting plants that support birds, butterflies, bees and hummingbirds or even their own diets. Roger's Gardens has also incorporated a milkweed exchange program where guests can bring in a variety of tropical milkweed and receive a free, native narrowleaf milkweed plant in return, all to support the health of monarch butterfly habitats in Southern California.

In addition to aiding visitors in creating their perfect gardens, the center gives back through Crystal Cove Conservancy, Mission San Juan Capistrano, the CDM Home Tour, Susan G. Komen for the Cure and more. Herbert and all of the staff at Roger's Gardens recognize that the only way they can continue to push the envelope and flourish in their next 50 years is to honor where they've been and create a world in which everyone can thrive. **NBM**



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