

Main Street

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“News worth paying for”

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BUSINESS NEWS

SPOTLIGHT ON BUSINESS

This is the second in an ongoing series of stories that highlight long-term Main Street advertisers. It is our way of thanking these local businesses for their support to us and their ongoing dedication to serving our community. Our first Spotlight story featured The Stoverly in Argyle, NY.

Gardenworks at MacClan Farms: Where Agriculture Meets Art

by Marie Grimmke

There's something charming about Gardenworks. It may be the drive along Washington County Route 30, five miles out of Salem, where the driver is forced to slow down and admire the sprawling, tidy farms along the Battenkill Valley. It may be the colors inside the renovated dairy barn—layer after layer of cheerful gifts, art, and food displays. It might be the wholesome feeling of buying something locally produced. And it very well may be the smell: in the summer there is a sweet smell of newly mown hay, blueberry pie, and coffee; in the fall, the smell of hot, spiced cider and cider doughnuts; and in December, balsam fir wreaths that are made in the pit of the old milking parlor. Whatever the reason for its charm, Gardenworks has been selling gifts, and a lot more, for 16 years.

Gardenworks is more than a shop. It's more of a place where the best of local art and agriculture is on display. And as a third-generation farmer, owner Meg Southerland has seen a lot of positive changes in the agricultural community. “I'm excited about what's happening to the area,” explains Southerland. “There are some very hardworking people breathing new life into farming. They have marketing savvy, and they fulfill the dream of living on a farm by creating specialty products—and by marketing Washington County productions into the wider world. These people aren't just doing things differently; they're doing things well.” Gardenworks features local produce from Slack Hollow Farm, Stonewall Kitchen jams and jellies, Nuns of New Skete cheesecake, Oscar's meats, and a wide variety of local cheeses, yogurt, and more.

You'll find plenty of local art and craftsmanship at Gardenworks, too, including Corrina Aldrich's photographs and books by Jon Katz. John Steves of Granville's wooden drying racks have become so popular Southerland is currently sold out. August '08's art show in the barn gallery included Shirley Hunter Smith, Millie Wells, and Leah McCloskey and August '07's barn show, featuring Virginia and Annelise McNeice's “Barn Paintings,” was a focal point of Washington County's farm tour. On many weekends throughout the year there is a local artisan displaying a craft, such as spinning wool, knitting, or wreath-making. November's workshops include gift-basket demonstrations—a great way to buy local items and to customize gift giving.

It's hard to believe that Gardenworks started in 1992 as primarily a dried flower business, when Meg and Rob Southerland moved back to the area from Philadelphia and Lexington, KY. Southerland has always loved horticulture, and knew it was her direction—she has a B.S. from Cornell and a M.S. from the University of Delaware—but didn't want to commute a long distance after Rob accepted a position with The Saratoga Associates as a landscape architect concentrating on master planning for college campuses. Southerland decided to expand the seasonal berry and Christmas tree business at MacClan farms to include dried flower arrangements and potpourris, in part because she had “fallen in love” with a flower farm she'd visited in Kentucky, and because dried flower arrangements were in vogue in the early 1990s.

Today, there are still many floral wreaths on

display. Many flowers are grown and dried at Gardenworks and are used to create wreaths and arrangements. But with time, the business has expanded. There is more interest in locally grown, organic food, for



Making Christmas wreaths at Gardenworks.

example, so that area of the shop has grown over the last five years. Southerland watches the choices that consumers are making, and listens to what people wish they'd found—and makes changes that reflect the customer's wishes. “It's when I find that one thing that a customer wants—that's so rewarding.”

And customers quickly become regulars at Gardenworks. Twenty-five years ago, my

best friend and I picked pounds of blueberries; today, although she's moved an hour away, we still visit Gardenworks when we get together. It's a great place to take the in-laws on a Sunday afternoon (there's always something going on at the farm), a place where young children are welcome—there's a kiddie corner filled with almost indestructible wooden toys—and the perfect place for grandmas to find a gift for their grandchildren. It's even “man friendly.” I have taken my husband there many times, with never a complaint. (He especially likes the cheese samples.) The displays are uncluttered, and it's easy to find what you're looking for without a lot of fuss, but if you need advice—Southerland gave me some tips on how to cook my Delicata squash, for instance—it's almost impossible to leave the shop without someone having a conversation with you.

Not surprisingly, Meg Southerland credits much of her growth and success to hard work. “And that is underlined,” she states. But she also values her part in the larger community. “There's no ‘I’ in team. That phrase is overused, but we're all better off working together.... I wouldn't want to be here without everyone else. We're a unique community and we need to promote everybody else,” Southerland smiles.

So as the store closed and our interview concluded, I asked Southerland if now she might be able to go home and relax. Like a true farmer, she laughed. “Oh no,” she shook her head. “Now I have paperwork. ■”