



business is BLOOMING

BY AMY BAUER

Plant sales are a staple for this large Southern California floral shop.

Dennis Robinson, foreground, manager of business development for Visser's Florist & Greenhouses, and his father, owner Ted Robinson, work in the greenhouse. *Gloxinias* and bromeliads are among the blooming plant best-sellers.

STAFF MEMBERS AT **VISSER'S FLORIST & Greenhouses** take pride in their claim to fame—popularizing the “European garden,” which incorporates blooming plants into the traditional, all-green “English garden.” Late founder **Bill Visser** and greenhouse manager **Linda LaTouche**—who has been with the store for more than 30 years—presented the idea at an FTD convention in the early 1970s, shop owner **Ted Robinson** says.

Today, European gardens are popular items nationwide and especially for the Anaheim, Calif., shop, where they make up 40 percent of greenhouse sales. The European gardens are among Visser's strategies for maintaining plant sales that many florists have lost to supermarkets and other mass marketers. Ms. LaTouche and

another greenhouse staff member develop all of the store's European gardens, of which about 40 are always on display. About 2,500 are sold each year, at a typical price between \$40 and \$100, Mr. Robinson says. Most are purchased off the shelf, but they can be custom designed. Typical blooming ingredients are African violets, *Kalanchoes*, *Gloxinias* and *Cyclamens*. Higher-priced baskets often include orchids and bromeliads. Ms. LaTouche recommends incorporating easy-care green plants such as palms, *Dieffenbachias*, peace lilies (*Spathiphyllums*), pothos and English ivies.

Her secrets to long-lasting gardens include choosing top-quality plants that are then acclimated in Visser's greenhouses, placing all of the plants into fresh soil directly into the baskets for longer life and adding whim-

Longtime greenhouse manager Linda LaTouche and late founder Bill Visser added blooming plants to the traditional English garden for an FTD convention program in the early 1970s and sparked the popularity of these vibrant arrangements. European gardens account for 40 percent of Visser's greenhouse sales.



sical accessories. Most of Visser's baskets incorporate decorative touches such as artificial butterflies or birds or dried twigs. The arrangements are popular for use in offices because of their easy care, and their beauty makes them well-suited for holidays and sympathy purchases, Mr. Robinson says.

LONG HISTORY

In its 50th year, Visser's is in its second incarnation as a family-owned florist. Mr. Robinson and his wife, **Cathy**, purchased the shop in September 2004 from Mr. Visser's daughters, who were looking for someone to carry on their father's life work and continue to develop the long-term customer relationships he had cultivated. While the Robinson family had no floral experience, Mr. Robinson brought 25 years of retail experience—including work with Office Depot, Viking Office Products and several restaurants—into the management of the 18,000-square-foot shop.

"My background is in finance and merchandising, and the shop is big enough that the retail skills come in handy," Mr. Robinson says. "It's not a little corner flower shop."

six European garden success secrets

European gardens are prized by **Visser's Florist & Greenhouses** for their long-lasting appeal, minimal care requirements in the showroom and popularity among customers—the gardens make up 40 percent of the shop's greenhouse sales. Incorporate these tips to get your garden sales blooming.

- 1 CONTAINER OPTIONS.** Visser's uses plastic-lined baskets because they are versatile and lower cost.
- 2 THINK OUTSIDE THE POT.** Place plants into fresh soil directly into the basket rather than individual containers. This gives the plants a longer lifespan and allows for better designs and more plants per basket.
- 3 CREATIVE TWISTS.** Most of Visser's European gardens include some type of add-in to create visual interest and added value, such as artificial butterflies or birds and dried twigs.
- 4 DESIGN IN BULK.** Owner **Ted Robinson** says Visser's keeps about 40 European gardens on its sales floor to offer as alternatives to cut flowers for any occasion. While the designs can be customized, he says the large variety ensures most browsers find something to fit their needs. And the easy-care baskets last well in the showroom.
- 5 TAKING CARE.** Care tags are included with each basket, and Visser's will substitute plants for customers who would like something different in the baskets they select.
- 6 BLOOMING BEAUTY.** Make sure the selected blooming plants—Visser's uses at least two or three per basket—are flowering when sold. Visser's favorites include African violets, *Kalanchoes*, *Gloxinias* and *Cyclamens*. Orchids and bromeliads are included in higher-priced baskets.

Sons **Ted Jr.** and **Dennis** also work full time at the shop, focusing on marketing and business development, respectively. Cathy Robinson helps out on weekends. The store also employs 25 full-time and 10 part-time staff members.

This dedicated staff, with decades of experience, has helped the Robinsons quickly get up to speed on the particulars of the floral business. In addition to Ms. LaTouche's more than 30 years, sales manager **Terry Viscounty** has been there 35 years, design manager **Gudrun Martinez** for 18 years and office manager **Rita Patel** for 20 years. The store's general manager, **Cathy Hickman Frost**, is a past FTD president, with 25 years of experience.

"They care about this place, they've been here a long time and this is their home," Mr. Robinson says. Health care and vacation benefits, a 401(k) plan and a 30 percent employee discount are offered.

VISSER'S CLIENTELE

Mr. Robinson characterizes the store as a traditional shop and says its customers are 30 percent business



Arrangements make up 60 percent of Visser's Florist & Greenhouses sales, and walk-in traffic is also tempted by the make-your-own bouquet station, right, with ingredients priced by the stem.

Visser's Florist & Greenhouses at a glance

Owners: Ted and Cathy Robinson

Location: Anaheim, Calif.

Year opened: 1956, by Bill Visser;

Robinsons purchased in 2004

Total shop size: 18,000 square feet

Greenhouses: 6,000 square feet

Main specialty: European gardens

Average greenhouse sale: \$30

Greenhouse sales: European gardens, 40 percent

Blooming plants, 30 percent

Green plants, 30 percent

Annual sales: Arrangements, 60 percent

Greenhouse plants, 20 percent

Sympathy, 10 percent

Weddings, 10 percent

Annual deliveries: 25,000

Employees: 25 full time; 10 part time

Web site: www.visserflowers.com

accounts and 70 percent individuals, who are split evenly between high-, middle- and lower-income customers. Walk-in traffic is primarily from those living near the shop while call-in orders are typically from more affluent customers. Many consumers are known by name and have been doing business with the store for several generations.

Visser's caters to customers throughout Orange County, which is home to about 3 million people, and six drivers serve a roughly 30-mile radius. Delivery charges, which have been raised \$1 in the past year to cover higher gas prices, are \$7.99 in Anaheim and \$9.99 outside the city.

SHOP SPECIALS

A monthly 20-percent-off plant sale—the second Tuesday of each month—has been a staple since the Vissers owned the store and continues to draw a devoted core of plant buyers to browse the 300 varieties. The Robinsons have begun marketing the monthly sale, the plant maintenance service and other specials by advertising on picks inserted into each of the store's 25,000 annual deliveries. About 80 clients are enrolled in Visser's plant maintenance service, which provides tailored weekly care visits at varying prices and a lifetime guarantee on any plants purchased from the shop.

Other examples of the store's above-and-beyond service include Ms. LaTouche's nursing ailing plants back to health for customers, trading out plants at no cost if one isn't doing well in a customer's European

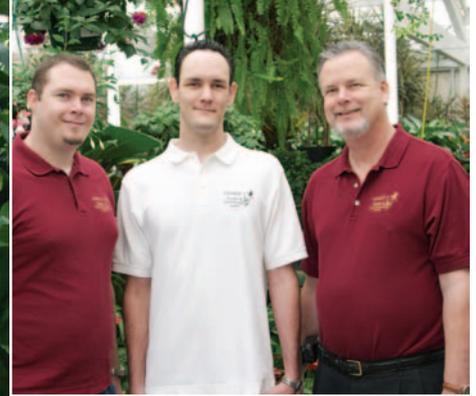
garden or if the customer doesn't like a particular variety, and responding to daily customer phone calls about plant care and maintenance.

GREENHOUSE SALES

Visser's buys almost all of the plants for its 6,000 square feet of greenhouse space, and they are purchased directly from growers up and down the California coast. The average greenhouse sale is \$30, and the majority of Visser's blooming plants are sold in 4-inch and 6-inch pots and priced less than \$10.

The same blooming plants that are popular in the European gardens make up the bulk of individual sales. Azaleas also are strong sellers, Mr. Robinson says. Most of the plants are purchased for indoor use, and Visser's carries home gardening accessories such as topsoil and fertilizers.

"Our greenhouse sales keep increasing, and we are surrounded by the big-box hardware places, Home Depot and Lowe's, and obviously their buying power is tremendous, and their garden centers are big," Mr. Robinson says. "We still are able to increase our sales because of what Linda and her staff do. Obviously, we can't compete with them head to head on a price basis alone."



Three members of the Robinson family, from left, Ted Jr., Dennis and Ted Robinson, work full time at Visser's Florist & Greenhouses. They are carrying on the family-owned tradition started by founder Bill Visser in 1956.

Visser's Florist & Greenhouses has 6,000 square feet of greenhouse space, which features 300 varieties of green and blooming plants. A popular draw is Visser's monthly 20-percent-off plant sale, which is the second Tuesday of each month.

NEW MARKETING

In addition to the plant pick advertising, the Robinsons have started an e-mail-based campaign, collecting customer addresses and mailing a monthly newsletter focusing on upcoming events and specials. About 3,000 names are currently on the list.

The store has enticed customers to share their addresses by putting out sign-up sheets and offering a chance to win free bouquets. Staff members also collect addresses at bridal shows, which they attend frequently, and a targeted wedding flowers e-mail is sent to those accounts. Customer service staff are trained to also ask those ordering to share their addresses. "If they know they're not going to be bombarded with spam and constant advertisements, they will give you their e-mails," Mr. Robinson says.

The store uses e-mail marketing service Constant Contact, which is "basically an e-mail campaign in a box," Mr. Robinson explains. For about \$50 a month, the software allows the store to manage its e-mail list, tracking bad addresses and returned mail; create newsletters and fliers; and generate reports gauging the effectiveness of the advertising, such as how many recipients are opening the e-mails or clicking through to Visser's Web site, www.visserflowers.com.

"It's very, very easy, and it's inexpensive. I can't imagine that a flower shop could exist and not do that," Mr. Robinson says. "It's unbelievably worth the money." Almost 30 percent of those who receive Visser's e-mails open them, Mr. Robinson shares, noting that is a good return for e-mail marketing.

E-mail newsletters have highlighted everything from the staff's longevity—for example celebrating Ms. Viscounty's 35th year at the store—to its charitable ties. December's newsletter included information about an open house in which 10 percent of sales would be donated to a local hospital. To keep from wearing out its digital welcome, Mr. Robinson explains, the

store is sticking to monthly messages and possibly one extra for each of the big three holidays—Christmas, Valentine's Day and Mother's Day.

The store used to run some cable television advertising, and Mr. Robinson says more may be in the store's future. A small sympathy ad in daily newspaper *The Orange County Register* runs a few months of the year for three times a week. The store also has used some direct-mail advertising through Valpak Direct Marketing Systems.

Charitable marketing is another important way that Visser's keeps its reputation and name recognition strong, according to Mr. Robinson. "I would say 60 percent of our efforts go into staying out in the community," he says. Staff members participate in chamber of commerce meetings; network at community events; and donate their services to support local hospitals, women's organizations and Boys & Girls Clubs. Mr. Robinson estimates 4 percent of his overall company budget is set aside for such efforts.

Mr. Robinson's future plans include continuing to expand the store's Web presence and e-mail marketing efforts as well as growing its wedding business, which currently accounts for about 10 percent of annual sales. He also would like to gain more convention business.

WEIGHTY RESPONSIBILITY

Mr. Robinson recounted the story of a woman who recently sent a note of thanks to Visser's for arranging the sympathy flowers after her daughter passed away. She recalled how Visser's had provided the flowers for every important milestone—from birth to marriage—in her daughter's life. "To take over a business that means so much to people in the community is an awesome responsibility," Mr. Robinson says. "It's just really rewarding." ■