



A SUNSHINE STATE HOLIDAY

More than 50 years ago, an enterprising fellow bought two acres of swampy land in the Florida panhandle for a little plant business. In 2022, that investment is one of the top 100 businesses of its kind in the country with a broad array of services and products – Esposito Garden Center.

Owner Ralph Esposito's father was a visionary who looked beyond the traditional products in southern garden centers and incorporated a Christmas shop like the ones he enjoyed throughout his childhood in the North. Esposito bought the business from his dad in 1988 and began attending the Markets in Atlanta shortly after. The Esposito team, including long-time employees Hurtis Amerson and Brenda O'Kelley, has been searching the Atlanta Markets for a variety of products ever since.

THE HOLIDAY WORLD

One of the first lessons they learned was the immeasurable value of developing relationships with vendors. "Regency International was one of the first companies we bought from," says Esposito. "We'd never been to a Market and were so green. Our sales rep was gruff, direct and helped us learn how to buy at a Market; he went out of his way to help us."

"We ended up spending \$18,000 on that trip, which was a lot of money for us. We bought a lot of high-end products such as Jim Marvin glass ornaments. At the time, we had no idea if people would like them, but we knew that we did. We ended up selling out completely. We sold virtually everything that we bought."

During the 1990s, Esposito's was the epicenter for the collectibles market in the Tallahassee, Fla., area with Department 56, Christopher Radko, SnowBabies, even Ty Beanie Babies. By that time, they'd expanded into more than 25,000 square feet along with a broad variety of services ranging from landscape design to florals to power equipment. As the collectible business waned, they moved into more extensive lighting options.

Their expansion into new categories is always based on customer requests. Over the years that demand went from selling plants to offering landscaping services and selling Christmas trees to providing full in-home decorating services. "Customers went from just buying a tree to asking if we could put it up and decorate it for them, so we did," says Esposito. "Now we have designers who will go to a home and fully decorate, both indoors and out – including the holiday lights outside. Porch decorating is no longer limited to Christmas alone; many of our clients have us change out the display for each season." >

INNOVATIVE RETAILER CREATES A WORLD OF DECOR, FLORAL, LANDSCAPES AND GIFTS



THE WOW FACTOR

A key to Esposito's success has been providing options customers haven't seen before. "At one point, we were putting up 50-60 fully decorated trees. Many people in Tallahassee hadn't seen anything like that before. Now we're down to about 40 uniquely themed trees, each complete with matching flowers, ribbon, ornaments, and more. Most of the designs are traditional, but there are usually three to five that are especially glitzy and high end." Esposito's still buys from Regency as well as Kurt Adler and RAZ. They end up with almost complete sell-through by the time their Christmas shop closes in mid-January.

Esposito firmly believes that "the eye makes the buy," so the team always looks for new themes. Each year, they decorate the majority of the trees with popular themes such as sports, hunting and fishing, travel, birds, and so on, but they always work in about 10 new styles, such as the surprisingly affordable Egyptian glass they recently discovered, which has since turned into a big seller. "Often, customers don't know what they want until they are blown away by something new or exciting," he says.

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RALPH ESPOSITO

THE NEXT PHASE

In 2020 as part of the company's mission to continually evolve, they built on the success of the holiday center and opened a gift shop, dubbed Lily's Gift Shop. So far, they've invested more than \$200,000 buying a diverse array of product lines at Market, including collections dedicated to women, men, home chefs and homemakers.

Shopping for this new endeavor follows the same basic pattern the Esposito's team has followed for decades – check out what the crowds are interested in, rely on trusted vendors, and trust your instincts. They look at the lines that have sold well for them in the past, but also set aside time at Market to scout for new items. "It takes a lot of effort and a lot of walking to scout products. We walk until we're wowed by something, then we talk about it," says O'Kelley, Esposito's primary buyer. "We have to trust our vendors and rely on them for guidance; there are just so many options."

THE CYCLE OF SUCCESS

More than 50 years after his dad started selling plants by the side of the road, and with more than 30 years of shopping Atlanta Market under his belt, Esposito happily says he and his team are not only meeting, but exceeding customer expectations when it comes to caring for their homes both inside and out – especially during the holidays. North Florida and South Georgia customers can revel in Esposito's seasonal cheer and enjoy holiday shopping all year long at this charming, one-of-a-kind store. Not bad for a patch of swamp land in Florida. ■



For more information, visit espositogardencenter.com.