

More Than Just Pots

Potters delivers up the fun

By Amanda Ryder



At a Glance:

Company Name:

Potters Nurseries

Location: Surrey, B.C.

Owner: Ed Holden

Years in Operation: 19

Website: www.pottersonline.ca

With four locations located throughout Surrey, B.C., Potters Nurseries have become the place to go for plants, to welcome the holidays, for a good scare (more on that later), and of course, pots.

The garden centre chain began back in 1991 when owner Ed Holden saw an opportunity to grow his existing wholesale growing operation. The company had been shipping and supplying product all over the Pacific Northwest, but lacked any nearby customers. When a one-acre property became available, Holden decided to take the plunge and enter the retail business. He opened the doors on the first retail location, the 152nd Street store in 1991. The store took off and Potters became a multi-location operation two years later when the second Potters garden centre set up shop on 72 Avenue. In 2001, the 192nd Street garden centre came to be and most recently, Holden opened the fourth

location, a smaller boutique retail shop, on Ocean Park (128th Street).

Holden describes Potters as full service garden centres that supply customers with top quality plants and garden products. In terms of non-plant materials, each location has a little something different to offer shoppers – one centre may offer more in terms of home décor products, while the other might have a larger gift area or statuary selection. Holden says during the busy spring season, the Potters locations are for the most part the same stores all around as far as the nursery end goes and then two of the locations have the added bonus of an expanded giftware section. In terms of appearances, the stores are quite a bit different, which reflects the fact that they were all built at different times. “We don’t try to make them conform or look the same. They all have their own personality,” says Holden.

Each store runs under the management of an individual store manager, who is re-

sponsible for buying the green goods from day to day. Because each store is located in a different part of the city, the clientele and shopping preferences do differ in some ways and allowing the managers to take control of purchases helps deliver customers with a product selection that’s individual to each shop. The Potters locations all report to the company’s head office, where central buying is carried out on gift products and hard goods. This permits them to buy in bulk whenever possible and one area where this is most effective is the supply of pots. True to its name, Potters offers up a vast array of pots and this is standard at each location. “We bring in between 15 to 18 containers of pottery a



year. We buy fairly well and we pass along the savings. We move a lot of pottery,” says Holden. Customers snap up Potters’ multiple purchase deal – if shoppers buy one pot, they get 30 per cent off, buy two and they receive 40 per cent off and if they buy three or more, they get 50 per cent off.

Pottery promotions like this are a frequent selling point in Potters’ award winning advertising campaigns (the company won a national advertising award in 2005). In 2003, Holden says the company took a good hard look at their advertising strategy and really invested in this area. “We went full-colour instead of black and white, we actually take photographs of everything we’re doing and we hired ‘the Ad Guy.’ We call him ‘the Ad Guy’ and he writes all of our ads. He’s exclusive to us and the ads are humorous. We get tremendous response from them,” says Holden. Print advertising runs in three local markets weekly as well as Vancouver dailies when there’s something special happening at the garden centre. Television spots also run through the spring and to promote the Halloween and Christmas events, two of the company’s biggest promotions.

It’s safe to say that big-scale events are Potters’ specialty and certainly what they’ve become known for. Christmas comes to the 192nd Street store by mid-October, but planning begins in early February. This location is the company’s largest with 28,000 square feet of indoor selling space on ten



The 192nd store goes wild for Christmas as the retail floor – and the centre’s full-size bull elephant – is transformed into a Christmas wonderland every October.

acres. The inside is covered with 16- and 20-foot garlands and old-fashioned store windows and displays are placed along the front of the store. Santa’s sleigh and reindeer hang outside the entrance and each year, a specific theme dictates the holiday decorating colours. The outside of the garden centre is outfitted with a computerized display that measures approximately 20 feet high, running the entire width of the building. Holden says the building is visible over a kilometre away. They’ve also created their own Christmas tradition – families can sit outside the garden centre in their vehicles and watch the Christmas lights flash and flicker to Christmas carols,

which play via the car radio. Of course, children can also come down to the 192nd Street location to visit Santa and customers can sample a wide array of packaged food products such as dips and hot chocolates that Potters stocks for seasonal sales.

Two of the store’s most recognizable props are also outfitted to match the season. A full-size replica of a bull elephant sits inside the retail space and wears a Santa hat, as does the 20-foot-high Easter Island Statue located next to the greenhouse. Both are from the movie *Night at the Museum*, which was shot in Vancouver. Holden says this was his way of providing customers with something that



they could identify with Potters. Originally, he'd looked into building a large sign, but discovered that he needed permits from the city. Fortunately for him, the city doesn't require this paperwork for a statue or fountain and the structure that they've nicknamed 'Gum Gum' – after his only lines in the movie – now welcomes shoppers at the entrance.

Holden's connections to the West Coast movie industry have also helped him establish the other event Potters has become widely recognized for – Halloween. At the Potters store on 72nd Avenue, September is a busy month. Normal fall sales continue at the front of the shop while a large crew moves to the back of the store and begins assembling an event called Potters' House of Horrors. "The event is a labyrinth-like walk through of approximately 9,000 square feet. It consists of several rooms and displays connected together by dark twisty hallways," says Holden. "It started out as a small exercise eight years ago and now is host to almost 20,000 guests over 12 days." He's purchased several movie sets, including the set used in *The Andromeda Strain* as well as a complete western town to create a true fright fest. A few years ago, the House of Horrors added animatronics to the mix to enhance the displays and, as Holden says, "scare the pants off of our patrons." Each year the walk through event changes so visitors get a different experience every time they come.

When the event is running, the Halloween event requires a crew of 36 to 40 people each night and this includes 20 local actors, security staff, parking lot staff, cashiers and a few technology experts to keep things running smoothly. "The event does add cash flow during a slower time of the year but it has its challenges," says Holden. The props are expensive and



The chain's other big annual event, the Potters' House of Horrors, scares up shoppers at the 72nd Avenue location. Visitors walk through a labyrinth-like maze and encounter animatronic wolves, costumed actors and frightening displays.

must be stored in climate controlled, and alarmed, containers. Potters also works closely with the city fire inspector to make sure the event is safe for everyone who comes. Despite requiring these extra precautions, Holden says the event has been a great success and was even voted the best in B.C. by CTV a few years back. And it's not just a scream for attendees. "We have a great deal of fun putting this on every year," he says. His staff at the 72nd Avenue location even got an extra treat last fall, when the cast from the *Twilight* Saga came to Potters' House of Horrors to do some filming for the third installment, *Eclipse*. "It was quite neat for the staff to meet the actors," says Holden.

Both of these extensive events are great examples of Holden's philosophy when it comes to running Potters. "We try to make the shopping experience fun. My thinking is you have to invite people to shop with

you, otherwise they are going to go somewhere else," says Holden. And the good news is that customers haven't been going anywhere else. The Potters chain is consistently voted the best garden centre in Surrey by the local newspaper for the last seven or eight years and was honoured as Outstanding Business of the Year in 2006 by the White Rock South Surrey Chamber of Commerce.

In just shy of 20 years, the Potters chain has grown from one garden centre to a company that operates four locations and puts on two can't-miss events year after year. It's clear the company isn't afraid of a little hard work and is up to the task of delivering shoppers with an exciting experience they won't soon forget. "We like the challenges these new opportunities bring and staff like the fact that there is always something out of the ordinary going on at our store," says Holden. **GC**