

HAMPTON BUSINESS WINS ACCOLADE

Little shop of dreams

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Tish Llanaez's business, Countryside Gardens, was named among the 100 top "revolutionary independent garden centers" nationwide by Today's Garden Center magazine.

PHOTOS BY JOE FUDGE/DAILY PRESS

A business plan, long hours and a passion for plants help Countryside Gardens blossom into a top-100 list.
BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM

HAMPTON — Even in the wee hours of morning, Tish Llanaez's mind works, brainstorming ideas. When that happens, she calls her store — Countryside Gardens in Hampton — to leave herself a reminder message for the next morning. Then, she may fall back to sleep. No rest for the weary is the downside to running your own business, she says, but that's the only way she wants it. "I love the business, so when a downside moment occurs, I read the sign

above my desk: 'Put your big girl panties on and deal with it,' " she says.

On the upside, all her hard work since opening day March 2003 is paying off. Sales exceed her original business plan — the second year was up 43 percent and last year was an additional 11½ percent. In addition, Today's Garden Center, an industry magazine, recently named her business among the top 100 "revolutionary garden centers" nationwide.



A small bird nests in one of the garden's dogwood trees.



Tish Llanaeza opened her garden center in March 2003, and sales have exceeded her original business plan.

Q: How did you prepare to open your business?

A: I worked in the horticulture business for many years and educated myself about the business. I also visited garden centers from Northern Virginia to the Eastern Shore to see what worked. The final stage was very important. I attended Small Business Administration classes to finalize a business plan. As part of my business plan, I was required to conduct a poll on local garden centers, showing a rating for each. The poll illustrated the likes and dislikes of the consumer and was very helpful. Finally, I paid off all my personal bills.

Q: What rewards come from the business?

A: Daily interaction with customers keeps me high. Being surrounded by beauty and the fact I'm doing what I've always wanted to do is very rewarding.

Q: What makes your garden center unique?

A: Personal service, soft music and wonderful smells greet our guests at the door. We want them to relax and enjoy the experience. We have a customer request book, and go the extra mile to locate plants that customers can't find elsewhere or we don't have in stock at the time. We offer plants that are on top 10 lists, but also cater to gardeners who want new introductions or rare and unusual goodies.

Q: What are you most proud of?

A: My staff and regular customers for their support. And, the gift boutique has grown so much financially that it now rivals the gardening end of the business.

Q: What do you worry most about?

A: Another Hurricane Isabel, Fort Monroe closing and that the big boxes will gobble up mom-and-pop stores.

Q: Do you still garden at home?

A: My gardens at home are not as extravagant as they were before opening the business. Now I'm creating huge garden beds in front of the store where I can have old favorites and test new introductions.

Q: What do you want to be doing in 10 years?

A: The same thing but with a little more time off.

Q: What advice do you give women wanting to open their own business?

A: I was shocked at the amount of work I did to complete my business plan through the Small Business Administration, but now I see how it helped me. Also, pay off your bills and don't let your vision get ahead of your pocketbook. You also need fire in your belly for the profession, or the chances of success are less. If you are the sole owner like I am, expect long days for a long time. Remember the old saying about Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire: She did everything he did — only backward and in high heels.