

Nurseries Find Success in Niche Markets

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It should come as no surprise that increased costs due to rising fuel prices and the slowed housing market have had a negative impact on many nurseries throughout Florida. While some nurseries may be failing, others are thriving even during these tough economic times. What is the key? Niche markets, or specialization. A specialized nursery provides products or services not provided by other nurseries.

There are many successful specialized nurseries in Florida. In Orange County, Larry and Sherry Shatzer own Our Kids Tropicals nursery, which specializes in bamboo, gingers and tropical fruit plants. The Shatzers attribute much of their success to their demonstration gardens. They occasionally travel to plant festivals and sell at farmers' markets, but the majority of their sales come from customers who visit the nursery and tour the gardens. Customers see how the plants grow in the landscape, how much fruit the plants produce, and how delicious the fruit tastes.

Terry and Linda Whitecar's nursery in Volusia County is another example. Their passion for the Florida native fringetree *Chionanthus virginicus* led to growing them in containers to share with others. Their hobby grew into a profitable side business that has one of the best selections of native *Chionanthus* anywhere. They also specialize in propagating variegated holly trees.

In 1987, Curtis Davis and Rosemary Warner of Osteen started Native Southeastern Trees. They specialize in native container-grown trees for landscapers and homebuilders. While high costs due to oil prices have led to changes such as a hiring freeze and elimination of free delivery, their passion for native plants and the green industry has kept their nursery profitable. Rosemary is president of the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA), and Curtis is president of his local FNGLA chapter.

Kari Ruder started Naturewise in 2004 when she recognized a demand for native plants in Brevard County. In 2007, Ruder partnered with local growers to form the Green Marketplace at Adamson Road. Through the partnership, growers pool resources to provide locally grown

produce, grow and sell heirloom vegetable plants, and educate consumers about sustainable agriculture. Sales have been sluggish this summer due to the slow economy, but Ruder is optimistic about the future.

All of these nurseries have found success by identifying a need that no one else was filling. By specializing, they are better prepared to weather a difficult economy. According to Ruder, focusing on just a few products allows her to “provide a lot more expertise” to her customers than they would find in a big-box store or retail garden center, and creates loyal customers. For more information about starting or managing a specialized nursery, visit <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>.

On Aug. 1-2, 2009, the first Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference will be held at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. The event will feature exhibitors, educational sessions and more. All Florida farmers are invited to attend. Visit the conference Web site at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>. For information on conference sponsorship or being an exhibitor, contact Bob Hochmuth, 386-362-1725 or bobhoch@ufl.edu.



Photo 1:
Curtis Davis, owner of Native Southeastern Trees in Volusia County, observes live oaks at his nursery. Despite tough economic times, some Florida nurseries have found success specializing in products or services not offered elsewhere. Photo by Dana Venrick



Photo 2:
Terry Whitecar, owner of Terlin Trees nursery in Volusia County, poses with native *Chionanthus* trees. Some Florida nurseries have carved a niche in a tough economic market by tailoring products or services to a smaller group of customers with specific needs. Photo by Dana Venrick