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Matterhorn Nursery

THE THRILL OF A RISK By Carol Miller

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Matterhorn Nursery's success is an anomaly. It sits on pricey real estate, yet devotes many acres to display gardens. In addition to the vast gardens, it expects customers to navigate 30 buildings. It will even take a few acres out of play for a couple of years to build a new display garden. That sort of thing just isn't done here in America. Except at Matterhorn, and it draws in customers to the tune of \$3 million, retail, per year.

The lure of an educated consumer

For those of us who attend industry events, Matt Horn, owner of Matterhorn Nursery, is a familiar presence. You

can see him with his notepad and pen, scribbling notes even on the third day of a grueling tour. It's hard to believe he didn't open his retail store until 1996.

Horn began his horticulture career as a wholesaler to landscapers (and still is today). He allowed local residents to buy his product at retail rates, although he didn't have a true store set up. The difference between the two customer groups was striking. "We found a lot of the landscapers didn't listen to us about our plants. They were in it for the quick dollar, and just wanted to buy cheap and sell high," Horn said. "The homeowners, they read a lot, were highly educated — they often know a lot more than we sometimes do — and didn't mind paying a higher price for a quality plant."

Once he noticed that pattern, deciding to focus on a



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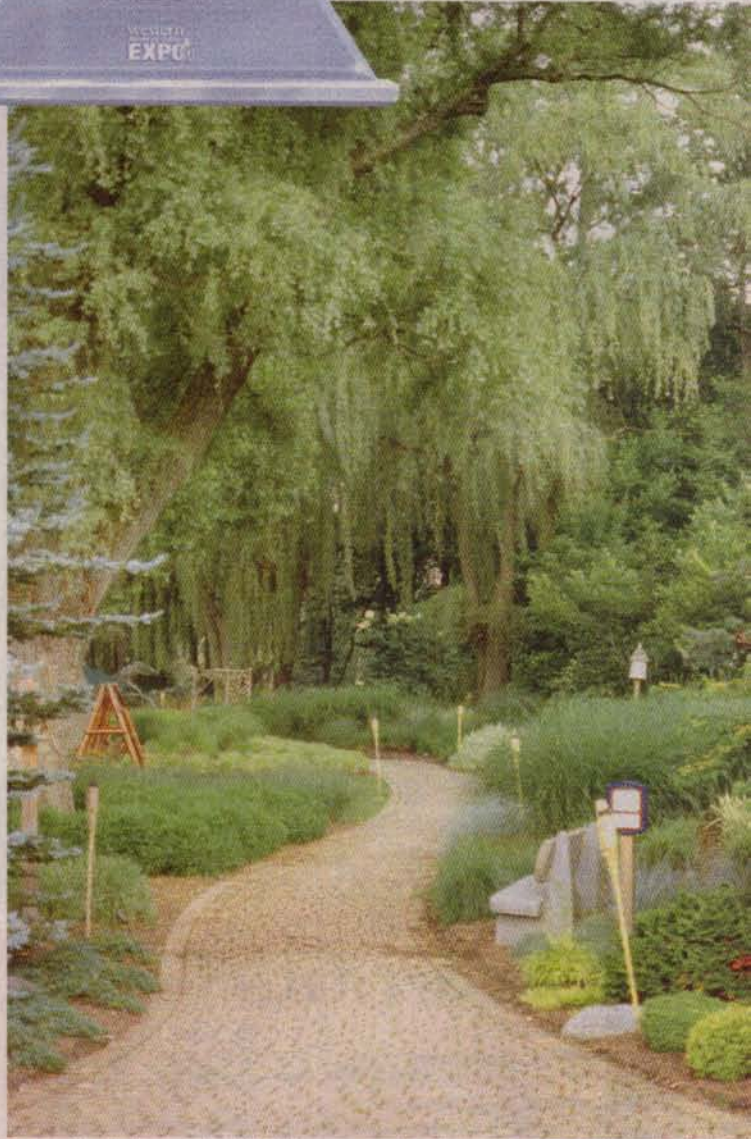
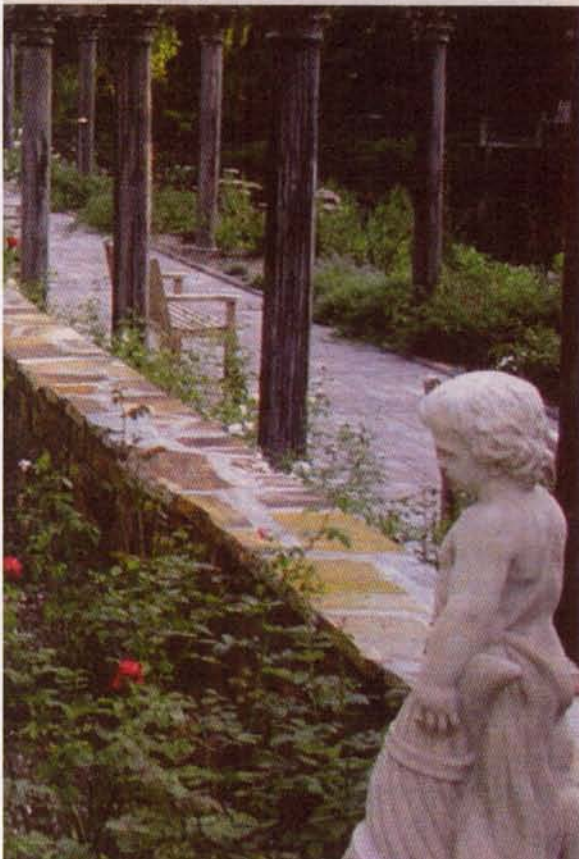
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Although planted in 2002, the David Austin Rose Garden (above and below) will not officially open to the public until 2004, when the plants are mature.



Top-notch display gardens like this grass garden play an enormous role in Matterhorn's ability to draw customers from a large area.

Matterhorn Nursery

Location: Spring Valley, N.Y., in the Hudson Valley.

Size: 35 acres, with 20 acres in use. 10 acres are display gardens, the other 10 are the garden center.

Date founded: 1981 wholesale, 1996 retail store.

Sales: \$3 million retail.

Owners: Matt and Ronnie Horn.

Drawing card: 10 acres of fabulous display gardens. They include lakes, nature paths, rose gardens and grass gardens. The petting zoo is a bonus for the kids.

The home runs

Matt Horn has the reputation of being willing to take a risk, even if the payoff is years away. Here are a few of the risks he has taken that have lived up to their potential.

Bar-coding products. Matterhorn was well ahead of its time when it began using bar codes 15 to 16 years ago. When the retail store opened, bar codes transitioned from the grower division smoothly.

Web site. Matterhorn was one of the first garden centers to have a major presence on the Internet.

David Austin garden. Although the garden will not officially open until next spring, it opened this year unofficially. (The grand opening is next year because rose breeder David Austin will have finished his book by then and will come for a book signing.) "It took us almost two years to build. We will probably see a return before five years," Horn said. "It has already added a lot to our business. We weren't really in roses before, and the garden helps us sell roses in general, not just the David Austins. The garden also has perennial borders, Haddenstone pots, paving, teak furniture and a florist. And our landscape division is already getting major jobs because of the garden. One customer requested that the landscape division re-create a section of the David Austin garden."

Another source of revenue will be renting the space to groups. There is a separate entrance and parking lot that can be used, which will avoid intruding on customers and traffic areas.

Florist. The florist department has moved around a lot within the store, and it is now up front near the registers. "We're not a typical florist," Horn said. "We mainly do weddings. We have a person named Ursula, and the florist was built around her." The store's reputation in floral design landed it the coveted Macy's Flower Show contract. Matterhorn has just added a 10,000-square-foot greenhouse for forcing plant material for shows and earlier displays. "A risk, but worth it," he said.

Nature path. The store has a quarter mile environmental walk that's open year-round. But it truly comes to life in fall. "We take 6,000 second to fourth graders through the walk," Horn said. "Everything is signed — what's edible, what's poisonous, identifying wildlife. What's nice with the environmental walk is the kids bring a newsletter home with them." That's a lot of parents. And they respond. They begin signing up in early spring for the fall walks. Matterhorn charges \$5 per child, who gets in return a small pumpkin, cider and cookies, then a hayride to visit the store's resident animals. Because of the nature path and the fall festival built around it, October has become one of Matterhorn's biggest months.

Branding. Matterhorn brands a lot of its own products, which feed back into the store's reputation. "It's expensive, but has worked out really well," Horn said.

Strikeouts

Everyone knows that Babe Ruth held the home run record for decades. He also held the record for most strikeouts. The biggest risk takers will inevitably fail. Here are a few risks that Horn took that, shall we say, taught him valuable lessons.

Cafe. Overall, the cafe has been a hit, but Matterhorn has had to fine-tune the menu to make it work. "We found that handheld light meals work best," Horn said.

Grills. The first year Matterhorn sold grills, they were a big hit. But by the second year, two barbecue specialty stores opened in the same town. Horn has been trying to find a successful way to sell grills ever since. He wants to find a line of quality barbecues that are not sold in town and focus exclusively on that line.

Florist. This topic showed up in the home run section as well. Until recently, the florist struggled because of its location. It was in a demonstration garden, and too many customers didn't know where it was. "Once we moved it to the nursery, it was a tremendous hit," Horn said. "I think more of our misses have been location problems, and not putting our whole heart in it."

retail store was an easy decision. Horn spent two years researching and preparing before opening in 1996.

The village concept, Matterhorn style

Due to the amount of land it sits on and its multiple buildings, Matterhorn looks more like a small community than a traditional garden center. "We've always had a village concept, but not like New Garden," Horn said, referring to a garden center in North Carolina that partners with compatible companies that have their own shops on New Garden's turf. "Our concept was to run the village itself, rather than bring in other businesses."

There are more than 30 buildings at Matterhorn, each one housing a different department. There's the birding pavilion, the book shop, the aquatics store. The format can be difficult to shop and work, but the



The image of the store pet, Max, is used in the store's merchandising and promotions. A popular local sight is the Matterhorn trucks driving around the area featuring the pooch on their sides.

ambiance is so appealing that customers seem to enjoy wading through the different departments.

"It's difficult to man all these areas, so a lot of them have a self-help format. A lot of signs," Horn said. "Signage has always been a big thing for us. We're not great, but we're working on it."

The Matterhorn staff has also developed an impromptu seminar technique to handle multiple customers. "The aquatic area is our biggest area by far and can get really busy. If I have one customer asking questions with six more waiting, I'll ask everyone to come in and we'll have a question and answer session," Horn said.

One way Matterhorn takes some of the customer demand off of its staff is how-to and educational handouts. The handouts cover a huge range of topics. "We table all questions asked of us, and at year's end, we'll see the most commonly asked questions," Horn said. "So we have over 100 guides, about pruning clematis, organic gardening, etc."

The handouts play an important role in Matterhorn's local reputation as the best source for gardening advice. For a store off the beaten path like Matterhorn, a reputation is vital to financial growth. "I would say that is the key. We do everything we can to defend that reputation. Beside the handouts, we have qualified horticulturists at



The new David Austin Rose Garden is designed in a way that customers can rent out space without intruding on retail traffic or parking.

our registers who can answer questions and add in tie-in sales," Horn said.

Water issues

New York suffered a drastic drought in 2002. Even when there is plenty of rain, Horn still worries. "There has been such poor usage planning around here that if we go for two or three weeks without rain, we're in major trouble," Horn said.

As a result, he is doing everything he can in his community to improve matters. "We've always been ecologically minded. It's just a common sense issue," Horn said. "We have a whole drought-tolerant guide, what you can do in the drought, can't do, how to lessen the hurt. We sell drip irrigation, aqua gels and mycorrhizal fungi. We make sure we sell Treegators with each tree sold. We're teaching people how to water, what can live with less water, what can't."

Matterhorn used to hold a lot of water-issue seminars, but cut back on them since interest waned a little because the botanical gardens were meeting that need. "We're going to go back to 20-minute walking tours, working with a schedule that coincides with tasks in the garden centers," Horn said. "I think we'll have better luck with on-site talks rather than showing slides."

Outside of the garden center, Horn has a seat on the local water board. He sees it as his mission to help the government take a long-term view rather than the short-term one that's so common in most communities. This particular water board was created to keep longer-term control over water issues. It is currently talking about creating new reservoirs, a commitment that will reach into the next 20 to 30 years.

"These younger communities should stop and take a look and plan for a more crowded future," Horn said.

● **For more:** Matterhorn Nursery, 227 Summit Park Road, Spring Valley, NY 10977; (845) 354-5986; fax (845) 354-4749; www.matterhornnursery.com.



Matterhorn is organized like a village commercial center. This building holds only aquatic gardening items. The gift shop has its own building, and so on.



Matterhorn Nursery forces thousands of plants every year for the Macy's Flower Show. Getting the various trees, bulbs and bedding plants to flower at the same time is always a challenge.

The Macy's Flower Show

For the past two years, Matterhorn Nursery has been the master designer behind the world-famous Macy's Flower Show. Matterhorn participates in a number of flower shows in the area, including one held in front of Rockefeller Center in Midtown Manhattan. A Macy's rep saw the display at that show and invited Matterhorn to participate in the Macy's Flower Show.

Unlike typical flower shows, the Macy's version is a spring flower extravaganza set up throughout the ground floor at its flagship store at Herald Square.

Besides the contract fee, the store receives a lot of publicity and the staff enjoys the challenges it presents. What the crew has learned about forcing plants could fill a textbook or two.

The show takes place for two weeks each April.