

# Rooted in the Rockies

From the greenhouse to the garden, the team at Gulley Greenhouse & Garden Center is dedicated to customers' success.

## GULLEY GREENHOUSE & GARDEN CENTER

### AT A GLANCE

**ESTABLISHED:**  
1975

**LOCATION:**  
Fort Collins, Colorado

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:**  
65 year round and 140 at peak season

**BUSINESS SEGMENTS:**  
Young plants, wholesale and retail

**CUSTOMER BASE:**  
For young plants, customers include growers nationwide. For wholesale, customers include landscapers, independent garden centers and local chains in Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska. For the retail garden center, customers include gardeners from Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska.

**WEBSITE:**  
[www.gulleygreenhouse.com](http://www.gulleygreenhouse.com)

## BY JASMINA DOLCE

Carving a niche for one's business comes easy for some, for others it's a challenge. Regardless of the obstacles, it is becoming more and more important for growers to differentiate from the competition and find their specialty, which also lends itself to a more streamlined production.

Forty years ago, when Jim and Jan Gulley founded Gulley Greenhouse & Garden Center in their very own backyard in Fort Collins, Colorado, they began growing blue spruce and columbine along with other perennials, and today their business has come almost full circle, specializing in perennial plug production.

Today, they are joined by daughters Beth Gulley, who manages the greenhouse, and Jamie Gulley, who manages the garden center, along with her husband, Alejandro Mateos (who goes by Mateo).

The family business has been through many transitions, from relocating to diversifying its product lineup to adding a garden center and young plant production. One thing has remained constant and that is the Gulley family's desire to stay ahead of the curve. They're bridging the gap between grower and gardener and focusing on the end consumer, which has paved the way for continued success and endless opportunity.

### PRODUCT PROGRESSION

When Jim and Jan opened for business in 1975, they took the advice of one of Jan's college professors from Colorado State University, where she studied in the horticulture program.

"Her professor said to get into perennials, that it's going to be the next big thing," shares Jim. "And so we did, and it was a big thing."

At the time, the Gulleys were just growing product in their backyard. As business picked up, they started taking over neighbors' backyards until eventually they decided a move was necessary.

They moved to their current location in Fort Collins in 1980 and built all new greenhouses. With the added space, they were able to build a retail garden center and expand their product offering. While the Gulleys were well established in the perennial market, it was time to introduce a new product category.

Jim and Jan added annuals to the mix when they landed a contract with a major landscape contractor in the Keystone ski resort area. "That's what really started the bedding plants and mixed containers," says Beth.



**A STRONG ONLINE PRESENCE**



As part of the company's retail efforts, Gulley Greenhouse & Garden Center recently began selling some of its product direct to consumers on the company website: [www.gulleygreenhouse.com](http://www.gulleygreenhouse.com). Mateo built the site and launched the online store in March 2015.

Currently, they are only offering a handful of products, but they have all sold well in the past few months. They plan to have a finished site built and more products available later this year, Jamie says.

Online sales are actually nothing new to the Gulleys. Aside from selling through their retail channel, they also manage the Jeepers Creepers USA website: [www.jeeperscreepersusa.com](http://www.jeeperscreepersusa.com).

Gulley has been selling the popular groundcover via the internet for about four years now, which has given them knowledge and experience to begin selling other product online.

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Their next venture came a few years later in 1988 when a Ball Seed broker requested that Gulley Greenhouse grow plugs for Ball.

"Ball was our exclusive broker for a while," says Beth. About five years later, they opened up the plug business to other brokers. "There was a demand for it."

Today, each division of Gulley Greenhouse — wholesale, young plants and retail — makes up about a third of the business. "Which is nice," says Beth, "because if one has a rough season, the others can pick it up."

**SIMPLIFYING PRODUCTION**

In the past, Gulley Greenhouse has grown plugs in all different crop categories. But this year, the grower decided it was time to focus on what they have always done best: growing high-quality perennial plugs. So next season, they plan to simplify the plug business and will focus solely on perennials.

"I think we finally realized our facility is set up for cold space," shares Beth. "And a lot of people use us to vernalize crops."

Jan also notes that perennials seem to be making a big comeback in the gardening industry. "I think that cycle is starting again, that 10-15 year cycle trends go through," she says. "We might as well ride that for now, and it goes along with the whole 'green' trend."

Gulley Greenhouse is also adding tissue culture crops to its production. "We've found really good success with tissue culture," says Beth. "I don't know if it's our light or our growing media, but we've decided to pursue it."

This year alone, Gulley Greenhouse will produce 500,000 units of cordyline.

**CONTAINER CRAZE**

Gulley Greenhouse has been growing mixed containers for nearly a decade now, but in recent years they have seen the category skyrocket.

"Nine years ago, we used to have one or two ladies just doing the little pots," Jan recalls. "Now we have over three crews every day doing all these custom containers. The growth has been incredible."

The majority of the container business comes from landscape businesses based in the mountain towns. "Mountain properties have a lot of caretakers and landscapers. So they are our customers," says Beth. "We sell to the landscaper, and they install it."

The custom container orders are not just limited to landscape contractors, though. "We do it on the consumer scale too," says Jamie. "Through the retail store, customers can come in and bring in their pots."

While the container business has been hugely successful for Gulley Greenhouse, they stress the amount of work that goes into it.

"To turn seven window boxes, you have to start the plugs back in January, and you plant them in the middle of March," says Beth. "To explain to a crew of five people what to do and organize all of that, it was quite a feat."

"Sometimes we spin our wheels trying to make it work," she adds. "But the order is guaranteed."

Jan also stresses how important product quality is to the landscape customers. "It has got to be perfect up there," she says.

The size has to be just right, the spacing has to be accurate, the container has to be faultless. They are paying for perfection, and Gulley Greenhouse makes sure to deliver.



Miniature gardening continues to grow in popularity. Gulley Greenhouse serves as the rooting station for Fairy Flowers and also builds ready-to-ship gardens for customers.





Gulley Greenhouse manages the Jeepers Creepers USA website and sells the popular groundcover through this online channel.

The great thing about Gulley's container business is that it is basically recession proof, Beth says. "Those customers aren't the ones affected by [recession]. And it's also drought proof."

Jan adds, "It extends our season because they don't start taking product until June when everything starts slowing down here."

The container orders give Gulley the opportunity to flip a lot of their frames twice. "We'll grow perennials first," Beth says, "and then put the custom orders in behind them."

Another perk to the container business is that it has provided a wonderful niche for Gulley Greenhouse. When it comes to competition, they are one of the few growers in Colorado offering this type of service.

"There's a lot of growers in Colorado," Beth says. "But we've all found different niches to take care of. I always think of ourselves as the perennial people, and we do custom pots and baskets."

Going forward, Beth says they will continue to pursue custom containers. "We'll keep going in that direction," she says. "It's hard to facilitate sometimes on the growing side, but it's so nice to have those orders locked up by September/October."

### FAIRY GARDENING: MORE THAN A TREND

While Gulley Greenhouse & Garden Center may be known for its perennial production and custom containers, you may also know them for their focus on Fairy Flowers.

A few years ago, when the miniature gardening trend first hit the industry, many said it was just a fad. The Gulleys disagree.

"It's more than a trend," Beth states. "They kept saying maybe it'll last a couple years. But it's been crazy."

The company Fairy Gardening, based in nearby Loveland, Colorado, has been using Gulley Greenhouse as its rooting station for all finished Fairy Flowers.

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Clockwise, from bottom left: Gulley Greenhouse supports local philanthropic efforts and is currently helping to raise money for the Colorado Nature Conservancy through succulent bowl sales. Shoppers at the garden center can create their own mixes at home by following recipes on display. To make their staple crops stand out at retail, Gulley uses purple pots for finished perennials.

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"They have a finished website, direct to retailers," Beth says. "So we're shipping all of their plants for them. They're still the customer interface, but we basically pull the orders together for them."

As a matter of fact, in May, Gulley shipped 3,000 miniature gardens out to California to a hardware store chain. "All 75 stores got 40 gardens each," says Beth.

Jamie says the company's garden center does very well with Fairy Flowers. "People are obsessed with it. It's such a great concept too because people can keep adding to their gardens," she says.

The garden center offers workshops for those interested in miniature gardening. "We've done themed classes," says Jamie. "We did a 'Frozen' one over the winter, and we did a 'Lorax' one for Earth Day."

The category continues to expand, as does the customer base. "You'd be surprised," shares Jamie. "It's all over. We'll get college girls coming in wanting to build fairy gardens for their dorm rooms, and grandmothers with little kids. It's totally varied."

**FOLLOW THE  
CONSUMER'S LEAD**

One of the biggest advantages to having the retail part of the business is the way it can bridge the gap between the grower and the consumer. The garden center is an excellent way to experiment with items, test the waters and get feedback directly from gardeners.

Jan says, "These guys [Jamie and Mateo] are great lab rats. This is retail at its best and they can say 'Hey, people are really interested in this.' They can respond with what really works well."

"It's fun because we can try new things," says Beth. "We can do smaller batches of something interesting"

And they're pleased to see a recent influx of young people at the garden center, wonderful proof that younger generations are keeping up with gardening!

"For a while it seemed like our customers were the women that had the more disposable income," Jamie says. "But now it seems like more and more I've seen so many younger couples, even without kids, just shopping for their apartments."

Outside of retail, encouraging younger generations to participate on the greenhouse side is just as important to Gulley. Having Colorado State University right down the street has provided a great collaboration.

"We have a lot of their students come and do internships here," says Beth. "We'll also give them our problem plants, they're always looking for projects."

At the end of the day, the team at Gulley Greenhouse & Garden Center strives to be a good steward to the community and holds its focus on the end consumer. That is what keeps their business going strong. ■

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