

# Routed for Success

## Garden Route businesses join forces

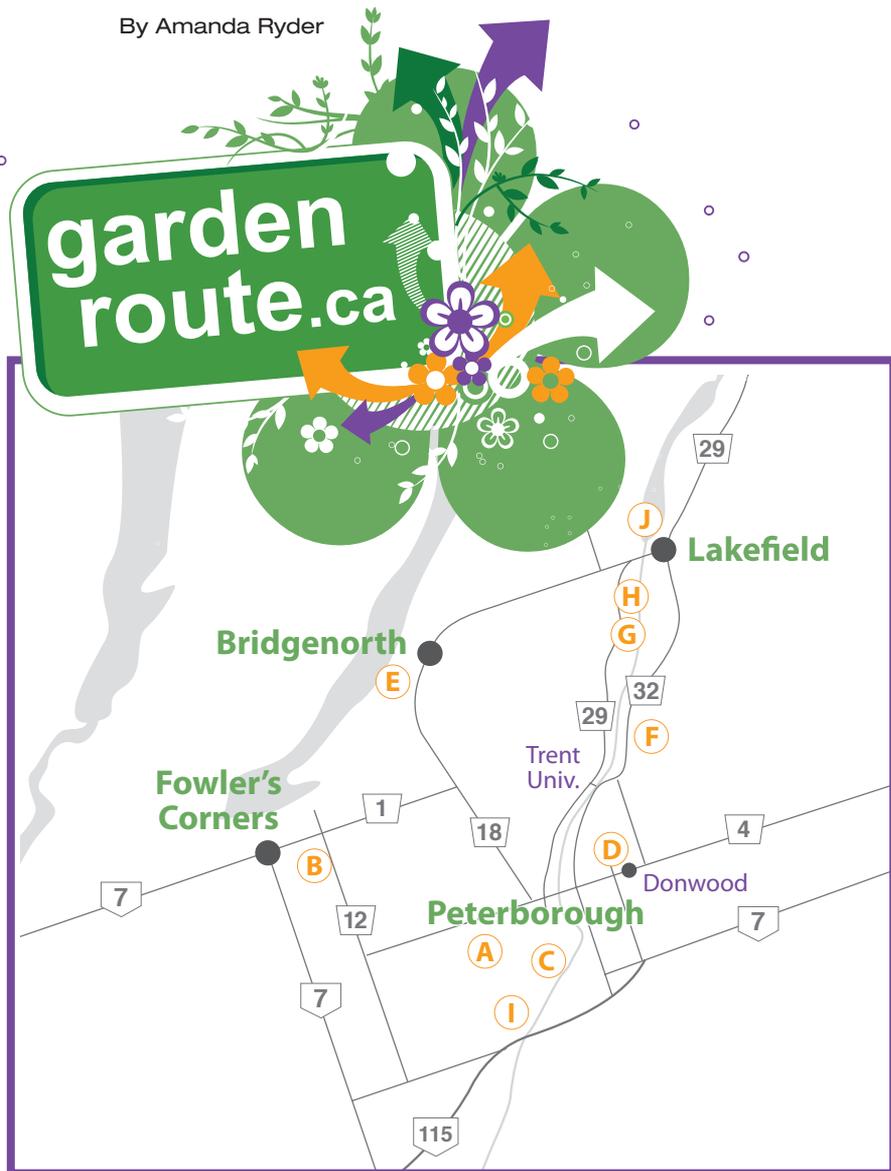
By Amanda Ryder

In an industry where competition is a significant challenge for the average garden centre, 10 Peterborough, Ont., and area garden businesses have found a way to overcome this obstacle – by joining forces.

Two years ago, representatives from several businesses teamed up to create Garden Route, a permanent, self-guided, garden tour set up to attract shoppers to specialty growers, display gardens and garden boutiques in the area. The route is attracting more visitors each year and the group of enthusiastic business owners is eager to continue the route and expand on its success.

### The makings of Garden Route

Victoria Whitney of Griffin's Greenhouses in Peterborough says that prior to teaming up, the local garden businesses "had that normal, healthy competitive spirit amongst ourselves." There had been some talk among a few businesses about joining forces to attract more bus tours to the area and eventually this chatter led to a meeting of five businesses. It was here the idea started to become reality. At the meeting, Brenda Ibey, owner of The Avant-Garden Shop presented the group with a pamphlet from a recent tour she took in nearby Prince Edward County called the Arts Trail. The tour was a self-guided route that takes visitors through various artists' studios and galleries in the area. "When I was going around the tour, I was thinking, this is interesting. Why can't we do this with our garden businesses?" says Ibey. The group agreed, and from there, Garden Route's primary group, or informal board of five, began. This included Ibey's The Avant-Garden Shop, Griffin's Greenhouses, Blossom Hill Nursery, The Greenhouse on the River and Gardens Plus.



- A. The Avant-Garden Shop, B. Blossom Hill Nursery, C. Ecology Park,
- D. Gardens Plus, E. Garden Style, F. The Greenhouse on the River,
- G. Griffin's Greenhouses, H. Horling's Garden Centre, I. Johnston's Greenhouses,
- J. The Rustic River

The group approached five other area businesses (Garden Style, Horling's Garden Centre, Johnston's Greenhouses, The Rustic River – Garden Elements, and Ecology Park) to team up. "We invited five others to join us that we felt were comparable and will provide consistency to what we were providing," says Whitney. "They

had good quality merchandise, great customer service and were places that we felt comfortable recommending."

The additional five businesses are what Whitney calls 'partners.' They don't necessarily take part in monthly meetings and much of the organization is left to the core five, but the partners still contribute yearly

fees and share any great ideas they might have. With the addition of these garden businesses, Garden Route grew to an approximately 30 km drive, with anywhere between 5 to 15 minutes between each spot, making it an ideal day trip.

From there, the group moved quickly to begin promoting Garden Route. They settled on a name in late 2008 and hired a designer to develop a website and promotional cards. The cards were printed just in time for 2009's Canada Blooms and distributed by some of the area's master gardeners who exhibited at the event. The Garden Route group also took advantage of Toronto's Successful Gardening Show to spread the word about Garden Route outside the Peterborough area. They mailed out packages with the promotional cards and a welcoming letter to horticultural societies to encourage them to take a bus trip to Peterborough or to distribute information about the route to members.

Locally, the group also attended horticulture shows and set up a project launch with the area tourist office, which attracted some great media attention. A little luck also helped with marketing efforts as the summer of 2009 brought the Ontario Horticulture Association's Convention to Peterborough's Trent University, which is only minutes up the road from Griffin's Greenhouses. Bus tours from this event toured Garden Route and several Garden Route businesses took part in speaking engagements at the convention. Each attendee also received a promotional card in the conference packages.

"Last year we got a feel for Garden Route and how people would perceive it. Our hope with putting it all together, especially in 2009, was to encourage day-trippers. The staycation and the daytrip – those were the buzz words last year coming out of every industry," says Whitney. As a result of the marketing efforts, Garden Route attracted steady traffic to the website and retailers saw customers coming into stores with the promotional card in hand.

### Expanding in 2010

The group's goal for 2010 was to go beyond just the card. To further their marketing efforts, Garden Route members placed an ad in consumer industry magazines and recently started up a Facebook page. They also kicked off their first ever joint event in June called Art in the Garden, a weekend when

### Participating shops

**The Avant-Garden Shop** offers distinctive garden-themed décor, artisan gifts, bird feeders and supplies.



**Blossom Hill Nursery** specializes in delphiniums and peonies and grows these, as well as other hardy perennials, in beautiful display gardens.



**Ecology Park** is a five-acre demonstration garden, with children's activity area, display gardens, and a marketplace for native trees, plants as well as compost and mulch



**Gardens Plus** offers easy-care perennials; hosta, daylilies, cone flowers, grasses, coral bells.



**Garden Style** offers garden-inspired gifts, including decorative metalware for home and cottage.

**The Greenhouse on the River** provides hanging gardens, custom containers, exceptional annuals and perennials.



**Griffin's Greenhouses** offers fantastic containers and hanging baskets and is a grower of annuals and perennials.

**Horlings Garden Centre** grows annuals and perennials, herbs. It offers baskets and containers, landscaping and natives.



**Johnston's Greenhouses** is a full-service garden centre with annuals, perennials, trees and shrubs.

**The Rustic River - Garden Elements** offers unique wrought iron garden and home accents.





local artists were invited to display and sell their work at each Garden Route location. Despite the fact that rain fell during the second day of the event, Whitney says it is definitely something they would try again. "It brought us a whole different group of people that were interested in art and not necessarily gardens and gardening. We got some great media coverage on it because it was free and supporting the arts too."

Garden Route has teamed up with local dining and accommodation businesses to present potential customers with options in case they do plan a weekend trip to Peterborough. The group recommends these "hospitality partners" to anyone who inquires and these businesses are featured on the Garden Route website in exchange for a small fee.

Both local shoppers and out-of-towners can quickly identify the Garden Route locations thanks to new signage erected at each business. The route's logo was replicated and placed in a visible area so people now know they've arrived at the right location. It's part of both branding and promotional efforts that the group hopes to continue as the trail develops. Whitney says it also signifies a commitment to this project. "It gives us all the hope that we are in this for the long haul. It's not just one of those 'we will do it for a year and see what happens.' I think we are all committed that this is going to be something we are going to give five or more years to, to see how it works for us."

### The benefits of the tour

In its two years of operation, the members of Garden Route are pleased with the tour and say working with the competition hasn't been an issue. "There is a little bit of where one business carries the same product as another," says Ibey.



The Garden Route group put together an Art in the Garden weekend this June, their first ever joint event. They invited local artists to come to the various locations to create and sell their works of art.



"For me, I try to stay away from what I know somebody else has, not only to benefit the other business, but in my mind, I don't want a customer to come in and see the same thing here that they see in five other places." She says each business has a product segment or service that they've become known for and the other members are more than happy to promote that.

Dawn Tack, owner of Gardens Plus, agrees with this sentiment. "I know the whole thing about the competition is

what's probably holding a lot of these other types of businesses back from doing this type of collaboration. All businesses aren't the same. We all are unique in our own way," says Tack. "We have the garden-type stores too with statuary and the other things to go into gardens. We're not all just plant people but we all do things that help create beautiful gardens."

For Tack, banding together with other businesses in the industry just made sense. Her store is unique in the sense that she

specializes in easy-care perennials and much of her business comes from her website or from mail orders. It's hard to spot her business from the road and the size of the operation makes shelling out for big splashy advertisements difficult. "I thought this was a good idea to partner up with some of the larger businesses to try and get some of the more local customers," says Tack. The benefits are reciprocal because Tack will also promote the Garden Route to her out-of-town and out-of-province customers and encourage them to tour the route. She also refers shoppers to the other businesses if they're in search of an item. "If a customer comes in and they're looking for something I don't carry, I say 'sorry, I don't have it,' but I also go the extra step and say you can go here or go there. What better benefit than to be able to hand a customer a map?" says Tack.

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-Dawn Tack

Since starting the tour, the members of the group have reported an increase in traffic to their stores and are confident that as Garden Route continues, more people will make the trip to the Peterborough area. The benefits can be measured in more than just increased sales as well. Ibey says Garden Route has also been a great way to network and share ideas. "It's just the support from working with these different business people. If I have a question or an issue, I can call somebody in the group and say, 'do you have this problem?' or 'what do

you think about this product?'" she says. "We've got a good core with different perspectives and different interests. Some are learning and some are experienced and we definitely share a lot that way."

In the coming months, the members of Garden Route will look at how they can expand on the project for 2011. As of right now, they are looking at updating the map, preparing for another Art in the Garden event and continuing their promotional efforts with new marketing materials and

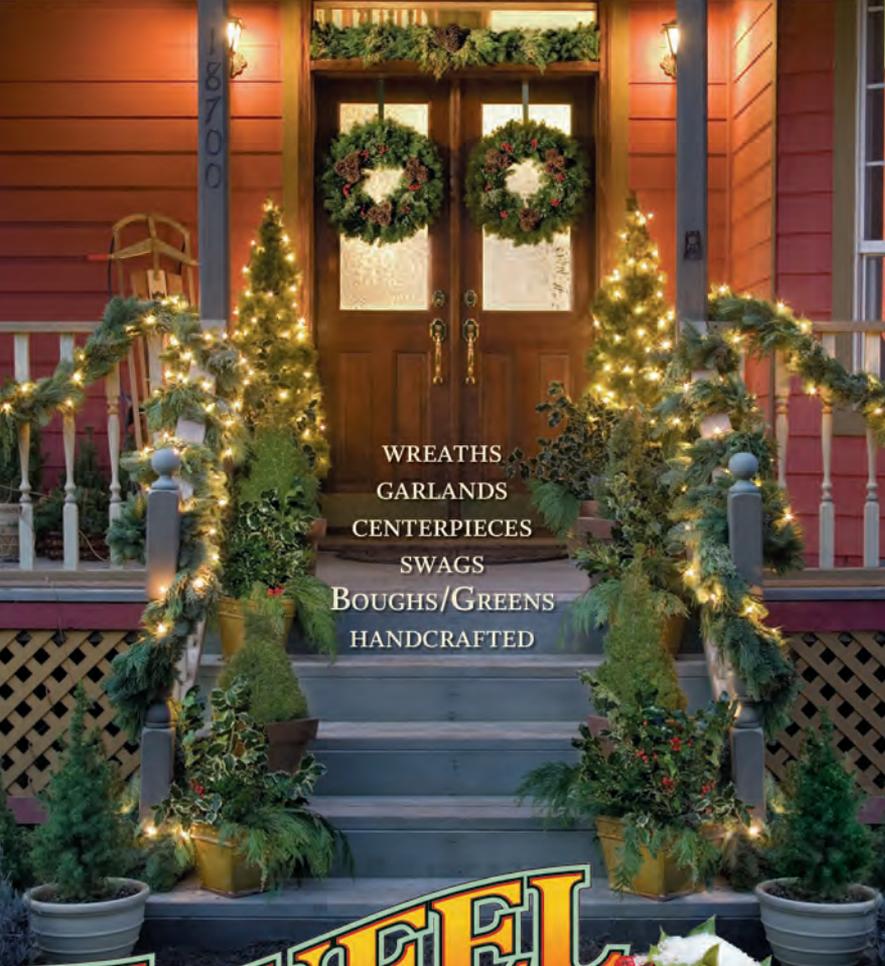
a greater social media presence. It's clear that in the two short years Garden Route's been in operation, the group has reached its primary goal.

"With this route, you generate the momentum and the mass to create something bigger than just the individual store," says Ibey. "That's more attractive to people that are travelling distances to town and saying 'where are we going to go this weekend?' That's the idea - to give them more options, and more enjoyment." **BC**

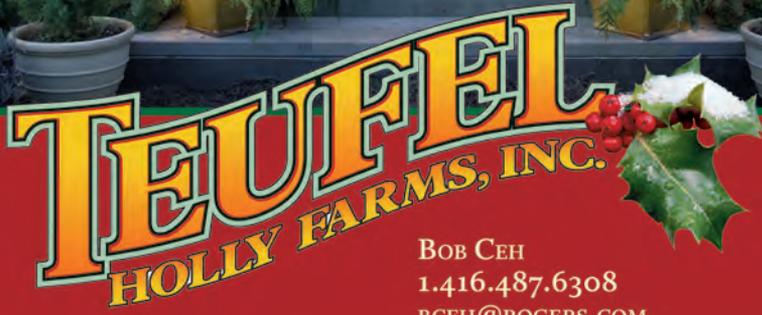
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