

Virtual Hortlandia 2020

Potted Elephant

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This week Joanne Fuller interviewed Cory Jarrell and Adam Aguilera from Potted Elephant Nursery and edited the conversation for this article.

How did you get started?

Cory: I was working at a wholesale nursery, and I saw a real need for locally grown houseplants in Portland. We started with one greenhouse in Hubbard, and we set up a wholesale business. We were going to the Portland Flower Market and other wholesale accounts. In year two, we expanded to two greenhouses. In year three, we expanded to three greenhouses. We decided to do retail business including local pop-ups at plant shops and greenhouse open days. Then we went online, and sales just took off.

Adam: I was a high school English teacher, and I saw that we weren't connecting kids to nature. So, I'm the CFO and logistics guy, helping to create our online sales capacity. Our third partner is my husband, John Heckel.

What kinds of plants do you grow?

Cory: We specialize in rare and unusual houseplants. We want to support other plant people, so we work with lots of local growers. We have a huge selection of houseplants for every type of situation. I love our begonias. Begonia 'Escargot' has been a huge favorite this year. People seem to like the spiral in the middle of each leaf. We grow the Jurassic series of Rex Begonias. These are big bold plants often with silver markings on darker iridescent leaves. Also, Begonia masoniana with burgundy stripes on bright green pebbled leaves. I love the cane and angel wing begonias including B. 'Fannie Moser' which has dark sage green upper foliage that is bright cherry underneath. Begonias come in so many shapes and colors--they look exotic but they are easy to grow.

We grow a lot of carnivorous plants-- both the hardy and the non-hardy ones. We work with a local grower to source Sarracenias which are hardy in Portland and should be grown outside. We also offer Nepenthes which are not hardy in Oregon, but can be grown best as a hanging plant indoors. I love the Sundews (Drosera). You can put a pot of them in your kitchen window, and they will be very happy. People often touch these plants too much, which is not healthy for the plant. Another great hanging plant is Hoya carnosa 'Krimson Princess', the leaves are variegated yellow in each leaf center but the new leaves often emerge bright pink. It's another easycare plant.

Is it your mission to connect "non-gardeners" to plants?

Adam: We love being a part of the very diverse houseplant community. There are Baby Boomers who have grown houseplants for decades, and they are beginning to share their collections. Then, you have the Millennials and the Gen Z folks-- who love houseplants as something beautiful and alive in their life to care for, especially if they can't have a pet. We have hosted 'plant swaps' where all these folks from different generations and backgrounds are nerding out on their love of houseplants.

We are also keeping biodiversity alive by propagating species that are endangered in their native environment. We believe we are helping make the planet greener and better. And, it's super important to me that we maintain an educational component, so we are emphasizing the importance of biodiversity in our social media.

Sounds like you are passionate about building a local plant vendor community?

Adam: Yes. We have learned so much about running a small business, creating online and social media sales. I would love to connect with folks who are interested in sharing knowledge.

Do you have advice about growing healthy houseplants?

Cory: Drainage, drainage, drainage. We use a 'soilless' mix of 50% pumice and 50% peat moss. You can actually use a 75% pumice and 25% peat moss mix for succulents, cactus and their friends. These plants also need to dry out between watering.

We recommend feeding houseplants an organic liquid fertilizer. If you can stand the smell, fish and kelp emulsion is great. You can also give them compost tea. When you bring a houseplant home that has been watered and fertilized well at a nursery, you really want to give it three weeks to settle in then begin your regular fertilizer routine.

How do people shop Potted Elephant right now?

Adam: Our shopping is all online right now. We sell from our Etsy shop at www.etsy.com/shop/pottedelephant and at our website www.pottedelephant.com . We also are on Instagram, @pottedelephant. Bigger items can be delivered to Portland area customers. We would love to have a greenhouse open house, but right now it's just not possible. We are exploring options for by appointment shopping and will announce that opportunity on our social media platforms.