

Hard Work and Plenty of Smarts

Contrary Mary's Plants and Designs, Minooka, IL

By Jennifer Zuri, Marketing Communications Manager for Aquascape, Inc.

When you visit Contrary Mary's Plants and Designs located in pastoral Minooka, Illinois just west of the Chicago suburbs, you're greeted by spirited goats named Bertie, Isabella and Robert the Bruce, a trio of miniature collies named Mickey, Duncan and Jamie and oh, yes ... owners Charlie and Mary Russell. A quick look around and you know that painstaking care has been invested to ensure that display beds are filled with the most appealing choice of plants and that water features are strategically located for maximum impact. Contrary Mary's offers more than 800 varieties of perennials, a couple ponds, and even a field of beehives for honey. All this, coupled with some creative marketing tools, it's no wonder that Contrary Mary's is enjoying a banner year in sales.



According to Charlie and Mary, year-to-date sales through end of April 2008 were up 40% from last year. The week of Mother's Day was their best week ever, and the Saturday prior to Mother's Day was the best sales day in their 11-year history. Keep in mind, they were able to attain this spectacular feat in what was a colder than usual Illinois spring season. Because they offer unusual plants, gardeners are willing to travel a little out-of-the way to get a selection of their unique perennials that you won't find at your local Meijer's or Lowe's.

Not only is business booming in the live goods department of Contrary Mary's but sales are beginning to swell in the water gardening arena as well. Charlie, a Certified Aquascape Contractor for the past 7 years, says his water gardening sales increased by 30% in 2007 and he's banking on growing that percentage in 2008.

Charlie and Mary are friendly, down-to-earth people that enjoy working hard and working smart. Charlie is the pond guy and Mary is the plant geek, and a morning spent touring their nursery and farm is a pleasure everyone should make the trip to enjoy. A large yellow roadside sign announces their existence and pulls traffic off the road. A decorative fountain welcomes you at the entrance of the greenhouse, and pond products are located front and center. There's no question these two are passionate about water gardening in addition to their unique plants. Too many garden centers relegate water garden products to the back of the store, but Charlie and Mary saw the opportunity available and gave water gardening a prominent position.

Previously, Contrary Mary's had 2 locations due to local zoning restrictions. Since their current location was zoned for agriculture, Charlie set up a retail location in nearby Plainfield for his water gardening business. While this proved a challenge in working two locations, Charlie was committed to his goal and was able to grow his water feature sales. In May 2007, the Russells secured business zoning for their Minooka location and were able to close the Plainfield business, thereby keeping everything under one convenient roof.

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When customers visit Contrary Mary's looking for water garden products, Charlie is attentive to customers and makes sure he answers all their questions, thereby alleviating any fears they might have about water gardening. Charlie has a pond crew of three guys that he trusts to dig and rock out the pond. Charlie likes to hook up the plumbing and build the waterfalls himself, and makes sure to tell customers that he'll be on the job.



In addition to new water feature installations, Charlie gets quite a few calls from do-it-yourselfers to fix their ponds. In fact, he finds that many do-it-yourselfers eventually become do-it-for-me customers. Hoping to get a bargain, homeowners purchase a pond kit on EBay or at the local big box store. Then when no one's able to help them along the way, they'll come see Charlie. Or as is sometimes the case, potential customers will pick his brain and then make their purchase online. While Charlie would prefer they buy directly from him, he knows that chances are – the person will become a future customer when they need fish or plants or want a larger water feature they aren't brave enough to tackle on their own. It's this type of friendly and knowledgeable service that keeps customers coming back to Contrary Mary's.

Charlie and Mary provide their customers with more than a lot of know-how and friendly help, however. Over 600 people belong to their "Plant Heads" and "Fish Heads" clubs (named after Jimmy Buffet Parrot Heads). Club members receive an e-newsletter with pertinent gardening information, upcoming sales and specials. Charlie notes that they get quite a bit of people coming in after receiving the latest e-newsletter. The Plant Head club has been around a while, but the Fish Head club for pond lovers is new this year. More than 100 new people signed up for the clubs during the months of March through May this year alone. Contrary Mary's also provides preferred cards for returning customers. The card, which looks like a credit card, tracks purchases when swiped, allowing customers to earn points that translate into dollars off a future purchase.

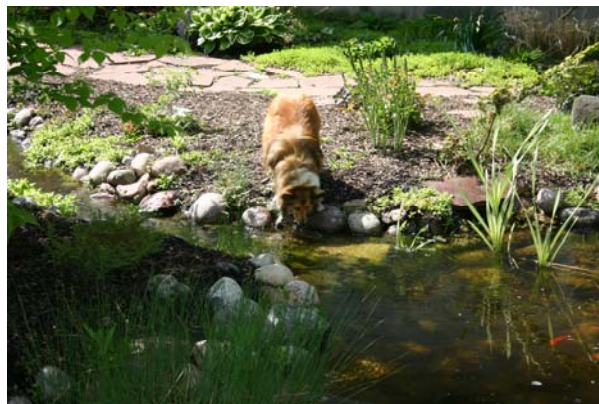
Contrary Mary's also offers coupons through *Chicagoland Gardening* magazine. They recently offered a coupon for a free perennial with a \$35 purchase. The garden center gets further exposure in the Chicago area when Mary provides plant seminars, such as the one she recently conducted for the Chicago Flower & Garden Show. "There were so many people at Mary's seminar," says Charlie. "They overflowed into the hallway, but since they could still hear her, they stayed to listen and take notes."



To round out their overall marketing strategy, the Russells have a website (www.contrarymarysplants.com) that lists their services, plants, and products. Water garden photos, upcoming seminars, plant information, specialty gardens and much more are included. About half of their new customers find out about them via the web site. During the busy season, the web site receives around 1500 hits per day. But if you don't surf the web, you'll probably find out about them when you spot their yellow Mini Cooper driving around town with their garden center name, phone number, and license plate that reads "RU GRN 2."

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Seminars are a regular feature at Contrary Mary's Plants and Designs. Charlie recently gave a seminar on decorative fountainscapes complete with a demonstration on installing an AquaBasin™. Charlie is convinced his water feature sales are improving due to the AquaBasin™. He installed a few in March, including one that was set into a porch floor situated directly in front of the homeowner's picture window. He's a fan of Aquascape's new LED lights too. "I purchased 100 of the lights during Early Buy and now I only have 14 left," says Charlie. "I like to use the new lights in streams since they don't overheat."



The Russells recently added a new display pond to their grounds. Situated next to a patio with a mobile fire pit, it's easy for customers to envision a similar water feature in their own backyard. Their personal pond is also on display behind their home and comes complete with an architectural piece of petrified wood the couple brought back from a trip to South Dakota. The true highlight of viewing the ponds however, is when miniature collie Mickey jumps into the water to "herd" the fish. Mary claims that Mickey has sold more ponds than Charlie!

This busy couple seems to have everything under control when it comes to promoting and operating their countryside business. Business is booming for Contrary Mary's despite a sluggish economy. To be sure, the knowledge they possess and the genuine care and concern for customers is an invaluable selling feature. Fuse that together with the e-newsletters, web site, seminars, preferred card, local advertising, and the Plant and Fish Head clubs and it's no surprise that the sun is shining brightly in Minooka, Illinois.

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