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HOME & GARDEN

Golden Gate Nursery grows with every decade; started in '80s by Cuban immigrants



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Naples

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Before Golden Gate Nursery became the full-service garden center it is today, it was a lone bright-red shack selling homegrown tropical flowers and plants in rural Collier County.

This was back in the '80s before Collier Boulevard adopted its name, says Rufino Hernandez, who co-owns the nursery with his brother Jorge Hernandez Sr., 57.

Then, the boulevard was a two-lane road surrounded by undeveloped land, except for the small shack, which was first opened as a nursery in 1984 by their parents Rosa and Ruben Hernandez Sr. They fled to Naples from Cuba in the early '60s to escape communism.

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“At that time there were hardly any Hispanics living in town,” Rufino Hernandez, 51, said. As a result, he added, his father earned the nickname “Ruben the Cuban.”

He recalls his parents worked various jobs before opening the nursery in Golden Gate. Ruben Hernandez always had a love for gardening and turned his passion into a business in which he would pass down his knowledge to the next two generations of his family.

Over the span of more than 30 years, the family-owned-and-operated nursery gradually expanded from five to 20 acres in order to meet the demands of a growing community, which isn't so quiet and rural anymore.

Retail plazas and housing developments surround the nursery situated on Collier Boulevard

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The center features an indoor retail space selling everything from garden supplies to animal feed and an outdoor nursery with a wide assortment of flowering plants, palm and citrus trees and pottery.

Rufino Hernandez said he learned everything about the business from his father. He and his brother Jorge took over the family business in 2004.

The original red shack was torn down years ago when the boulevard was expanded, and in its place a large, green building was built with a wooden porch, which opens out to a beautifully landscaped garden of multi-colored pots, statues and flowers right on the boulevard.

But Ruben Hernandez's memory, and that of the bright-red shack from years ago, live on through a large wall mural, which greets customers as they walk inside the nursery's retail space.

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The colorful mural is of a photo taken of Ruben Hernandez and his oldest son Ruben Hernandez Jr., who passed away years ago. They both smile as they pose for a photo behind the register inside the original nursery.

Rufino Hernandez hopes to honor their mother Rosa, who died last year, by adding her in the mural. "She was our matriarch," he said.

His nephew, JJ "Jorge" Hernandez Jr., 39, learned the business from his grandparents and manages the nursery alongside his father.

"It's a big operation," he said as he drove a golf cart around the premises on a sunny weekday afternoon, helping customers pick out plants.

When he was younger, he distanced himself from the family business and worked in the recording industry as a studio engineer. But like his father and uncle before him, he was determined to continue his family's legacy.

The fact that the nursery is a family affair is one of the reasons it has stayed successful for so long, Rufino Hernandez said. That and the relationships they've cultivated over time with the

"We listen to what people want and always keep good stock and inventory and try to differentiate ourselves from a big-box store.

"We also pride ourselves on a cool selection of plants. Obviously, we have things that everyone wants but we also have unique and different things that you won't find anywhere else."

That includes a variety of garden tools, citrus trees (grapefruit, lemon and lime) and both local and imported outdoor decor from places like Haiti.

The nursery sometimes feels like a zoo with small birds and talkative parrots, housed in large cages, and two rescue cats, Willow and Tito, who roam freely around the retail shop during business hours.

While the family used to grow their own plants and flowers, now they get much of their live products from agricultural areas across Florida like Homestead, a Miami suburb.

The Hernandez family also owns another business in town called the Garden District, a flower shop near downtown Naples that caters to weddings and other special occasions.

As the nursery nears its 40th anniversary, only a couple of years away, the Hernandez family plans to renovate its retail space over the summer to keep it fresh for the next decade to come.

Golden Gate Nursery

Where: 14765 Collier Blvd., Naples

Hours: 7 a.m.- 6 p.m., Monday-Friday; 7 a.m.- 5 p.m., Saturday; and 8 a.m. - 4 p.m., Sunday

More info: www.goldengatenurserynaples.com/; 239-455-7233

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