

Business blossoms

Just in time for spring, Molbak's nursery in Woodinville is sporting a new look

If green is good, then more green is better, according to **Jens Molbak**, who with his wife, **Blair**, owns Molbak's, the destination nursery in Woodinville that is more than a half-century old and, under his guidance, has just undergone a whole new redesign and expansion.

About a million people head out to Molbak's each year to poke around the retail garden and gift store, attend a plant class or just to get ideas for garden and home. A million people.

Now, because of a redesign, those familiar with the layout of the retail store will find it easier to get around. "It's all about blurring lines between indoors and out," says Molbak, who points to the open space and a natural flow from home and gifts into garden areas, which before had been segregated by walls and glass doors.

Aisles are wider, and plant tables are designed for solutions — plants compatible for color, texture and care are grouped together. It's clever visual merchandising at its best, with simple signs denoting each area's theme, such as "elegant" "serene" "color pop" "impact," and my favorite, "possibilities." You don't feel like you need a GPS to navigate the multi-acre space.

Molbak tells me the store's average retail customer spends about \$60 to \$70, and business is good. Even in this tight economy.

"The garden-center industry seems insulated," says Molbak, whose parents, **Egon and Laina Molbak**, started the business back in 1956, and 46 years later sold it to their son and daughter-in-law.

"In fact, we expect 50 percent more production this year. People don't get tired of gardening. It's uplifting." And he says plants are an investment in one's home.

"Imagine your house bare, without them."

His own home reflects his philosophy. His gardens are ablaze right now in masses of orange tulips, with purple allium coming up next. Along with flowers, he says his family also has a vegetable garden.

Now Molbak is expanding the business into something even bigger — a new wholesale operation, which just opened. "Our (40-acre) farm has been underutilized," says Molbak, despite the fact that they already grow 80 percent of all the annual and perennial plants they sell at the retail store.

Growing the wholesale business from a relatively small operation to a much bigger one is expected to mushroom sales. "Landscapers have been asking for more and more. We needed to meet their needs," he says.

Six acres of the 24 acres in use for production on Molbak's farm, south of Woodinville, have now been ramped up for wholesale sales. Row upon row of a variety of growing things are lined up for the wholesale

buyer. And landscapers and others are getting the word and swarming in.

They'll find everything from a wide variety of trees and bushes of all sorts to the tiniest of plants, many grown right there, others from growers in the region. "So plants are much more likely to have success, having been started right here. It's all about local," he says.

I toured some of the massive greenhouses on the farm, which has a room full of computerized gear controlling heating, venting, shade, weather stations, watering and lights.

The Molbak's greenhouses, about 300,000 square feet in total, are the place

where poinsettias are started in June, but now are full of the tiniest impatiens, geraniums of every color in every stage of growth, mosses, ranunculus, zinnias, grasses, the list seems endless. It is Disneyland for gardeners. Rows of 100-foot-long tables can be easily rolled right or left by one person, tables full of rainbows of thousands of plants in sustainable soil, many in paper-thin, peat-based material that can be popped right into the ground. "Low maintenance, easy to grow, that's what everyone wants now," says Molbak.

Pots are even going green, with many at Molbak's made from rice hulls — pots that can be composted.

At the farm, wholesale buyers will pay for their transactions in a small Pan-Abode log structure that was built in 1964 for Molbak's grandfather when he came to visit from Denmark. So from grandfather's guesthouse to a playhouse, to his father's office, to its latest iteration as a wholesale office, this building has seen a lot of life.



AL DODSON PHOTO

Jens Molbak, co-owner of Molbak's nursery, kneels among the blossoms in a company greenhouse.