



Accessibility in mind

Terra Gardens owner's gesture for his mother opens the door to other wheelchair-bound gardening enthusiasts

Terra Gardens owner Dan Estacio was just trying to make his Salem, Oregon, nursery accessible for his wheelchair-bound mother, Rudeen Estacio (below), when he renovated it. Now it's a destination for many wheelchair-bound gardening enthusiasts. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

BY MITCH LIES

Dan Estacio, owner of **Terra Gardens Nursery & Bark** in Salem, Oregon wasn't looking to gain notoriety for being ADA accessible when he renovated his nursery five years ago. He was just trying to make the facility accessible to his wheelchair-bound mother. That he did make it ADA accessible, however, hasn't hurt his business.

Terra Gardens, in fact, is now a destination for many wheelchair-bound gardening enthusiasts, something Estacio started taking pride in the moment he realized how influential it was to open an ADA, or Americans with Disabilities Act, accessible garden center.

"It suddenly gave people access to something that they didn't have, and it opened up my understanding of how many of those folks love to go to a garden center but were resigned to go to a box store. And they were just thrilled.

"It is a nice feeling to be able to do this," Estacio said.



Just for Mom

Estacio said it was particularly rewarding to open up his nursery to his mother, who instilled in him a love of plants and who passed away at the age of 81 in January 2023. For many of her later years, he said, she was unable to get around the old version of Terra Gardens.

"She couldn't shop at our facility, because our entire facility was gravel and there was no way she could get around

it," Estacio said. "She was kind of confined to a couple of small areas when she came here.

"We even tried an electric scooter, and it could get her to some areas, but not all of it," he said.

When in 2020 Estacio set out to renovate the facility, he approached the builders and told them his intent. That, he said, was the first time he realized he was making it ADA accessible.

"They were like 'ADA? Yes, we can do that.' And I was like, 'Okay, well, ADA.' And I didn't think it would matter to anybody other than my mom, who actually got to shop here several times before she passed away and she was delighted with it," Estacio said.

Broader impact

His realization that he had accomplished something considerable struck him in the spring of 2021. On a Saturday, two weeks after Estacio opened the new facility, he noticed several wheelchair-bound customers milling about the plants at the nursery. »

Accessibility in mind



The facility has been laid out so that there are no dead ends where a wheelchair would get stuck turning around and all doors open automatically. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

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The facility has aisles at least six feet wide and with main aisles at a width of 12 feet, so two people in wheelchairs could pass each other without difficulty. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

His first thought was that a local retirement center had bused in some residents.

After asking around, however, he realized the wheelchair-bound customers didn't know one another and were from different parts of the state.

Eventually Estacio learned from a wheelchair-bound customer from Medford that a feature story on the nursery had been published on the Disability Rights Oregon website. In the article, it was highlighted that the nursery was ADA accessible.

"I didn't even know there was such a website that you could go to that might make a recommendation like that," Estacio said.

Later, he learned that the story was written by a gentleman who had shopped at Terra Gardens for years before he became wheelchair bound. The gentleman told Estacio that he noticed while driving by one day that the new facility looked to be ADA accessible.

Estacio asked the gentleman, whose name he can't remember, if there was anything else he could do to make it more accessible to wheelchair-bound customers, and was told he could make the bathroom a little more accessible, and so did that, too.

Also at the gentleman's advice, the nursery added a second ramp to the entrance so people in wheelchairs could access the nursery without having to drive through the parking lot on their wheelchairs.

"My intent was to make it accessible to my mom, but in the long run, I think a lot of people's moms and dads ended up hav-

ing access to it, as well and kids and cousins that never did before," Estacio said.

Specifications for adequate access

Estacio designed the facility with aisles at least six feet wide and with main aisles at a width of 12 feet, so two people in wheelchairs could pass each other without difficulty. He made sure there were no dead ends, where a wheelchair would have difficulty turning around. All doors open automatically.

The nursery also carries a wide assortment of plastic pots that are easier for wheelchair-bound garden enthusiasts to work with. "We sell quite a few of the lighter weight, big, plastic pots," he said.

"Gardening tends to lean heavily on people who are healthy," Estacio said. "And yet you have a lot of people out there, whether young or old, who don't have the physical ability to do it, but they would really like to. So we like to make that possible."

Estacio's mom, Elizabeth (Rudeen) Estacio, incidentally, was no slouch when it came to gardening. She became quite adept at Bonsai techniques, Estacio said, a skill she learned while in the Bay Area. At one point, Estacio noted, Rudeen actually met and spent some time with John Naka, who at the time was president of the California Bonsai Association and who later became internationally renowned among Bonsai enthusiasts.

Estacio also noted that his mother and father, Albert Estacio, helped him purchase the nursery in 2004. And both parents worked for him at the nursery >>

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Terra Gardens owners Dan Estancia and his wife Pam. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA GARDENS

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for several years, with Rudeen teaching Bonsai classes for a spell.

“They jumped in and helped me get started,” he said.

Eventually, Estacio said he began to realize Rudeen’s ability to enjoy gardening was waning significantly. “And so, I wanted to have a facility that she could enjoy towards the end of her life.”

Albert, who is still alive, still enjoys coming to the facility, Estacio added. “He has Alzheimer’s, but he is still able to enjoy his visits here.”

Estacio said he hesitates to characterize the design of his nursery as a community service. But, he said, the fact that he has been able to open up a nursery to people who normally would have a hard time gardening means a lot to him. And, he noted, the nursery still gets a regular influx of people in wheelchairs.

“A lot of that tends to be word-of-mouth now,” he said. “Over time, the word has got out that it’s a safe place to get around.” ©

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