

IN THE GARDEN



POTTERS



PHOTOS BY BILL KEAY/VANCOUVER SUN

Ed Holden shows a car-in-a-can gift — one of many holiday items at his Potters store in Surrey, which is known for its Christmas stock. But it all started with horticulture.

Meet Mr. Christmas

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None does Christmas better than Ed Holden. Every year, he transforms his garden centre — Potters on 48th Avenue in Surrey — into an amazing Christmas wonderland of twinkling lights, giant Santas and sparkling decorations to make it the biggest and most extensively stocked Christmas store in B.C., possibly in Canada.

I visited the store with my grandchildren at the weekend and had a blast. My three-year-old granddaughter, Maya, adored the music box collection. It features some fabulously entertaining pieces, including a miniature theatre presenting the entire *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*, a magical carousel, carnival-like parachute ride and a clock with twirling dancers.

The *Sesame Street* corner and the life-size elephant in Santa hat were also big hits with Maya and her little brother, Banks, as was the area featuring a caroling penguin, dancing rooster and bear that recited *The Night Before Christmas*.

It was fun, too, to show my grandchildren a series of charming three-dimensional Christmas scenes that were once window displays in the 1980s at the downtown Toronto Eaton's store.

Maya and Banks loved seeing Santa eating a cookie by a fire in a cosy kitchen



Potters boasts a display once seen in the windows of the Toronto Eaton's store.

and a scene with children tucked up in bed surrounded by toys and candy canes. It was fun for me to make up stories around the pictures for them.

But the magic of this destination store, which draws thousands of customers from all over the Lower Mainland every year, is that it not only offers an enchanting experience for children — shouldn't this be the mark of all Christmas stores? — it also stocks an astonishing range of decorations as well as novelty and quality gift items. The amount of interesting stuff on display is simply mind-boggling.

Other B.C. garden centre retailers have been spotted incognito in the store searching for ideas. Yes, what Holden is doing as a garden centre owner has many in the industry taking note.

However, what they really need to be studying is the big heart and creative im-

pulse of the man behind it all — Holden himself, who has a long and impressive history of ground-breaking entrepreneurship in horticulture.

In 1975, he opened his own tropical plant store in Langley. He sold it in 1982 and bought greenhouses with a partner (now retired) and started White Rock Nurseries in South Surrey.

Holden became a respected grower, producing quality crops of pelargoniums, poinsettias and top-notch hanging baskets. One of his most significant achievements was to launch the popular plant brand name Tried & True, which is still being used today.

"Although we sold to practically every garden centre in the Lower Mainland, most of them were across two bridges. None of the garden centres close to us were buying from us," he says.

To solve this problem, he decided to

open his own garden centre in 1991 on 152nd Avenue. He called the store Potters for no other reason than his sister told him it was an easy name that everyone could spell.

"I find it funny now when customers call me Mr. Potter," says Holden.

In 1993, he opened a second Potters store on four acres on 72nd Avenue. This store is famous every October for its Halloween House of Horrors.

"It takes us two months to assemble and a staff of 36 to man," he says. "We get about 18,000 people a year, and the lineup often stretches down 72nd Ave."

In 2000, Holden opened a third store, which he replaced in 2008 with the current state-of-the-art, 28,000-square-foot store with low-energy lighting and computer-controlled cooling system at the corner of 48th Avenue and 192nd Street.

Most of the year, the store operates as a regular garden centre, but by mid-October it is transformed into the current mega-Christmas centre with its mesmerizing range of merchandise.

In 2005, Holden suffered a heart attack. His doctor has ordered him to slow down, but he insists on working a busy three-day week. Holden's indefatigable Christmas spirit also extends to work for charities. Each year, Potters hosts a Breast Cancer Gala that over the past two years has raised about \$30,000.

If you've not had the Potters experience, make the trip. You won't be disappointed.

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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



Poinsettia

Q. I've kept a poinsettia from last year. It is healthy, with lots of green leaves. How can I get it to bloom again?

SW. You're too late to get it to change colour this year. The process is quite detailed and specific. What you should have done was prune the plant back by half in February. From June to August, you could have had it outside, either in its pot or in the garden. About mid-August, you should have brought it back indoors, and by the end of September it should have been locked away in a dark closet for 13 hours of darkness a day. It needs this treatment for seven weeks. When the plant develops buds, it can be brought out into natural light in a window. Frankly, I wince when I see poinsettias kept over into spring. I wish everyone would throw them out once they are done after Christmas and buy a nice new plant in December. To my mind, they should be treated like cut-flowers: enjoy them... then ditch 'em.



Anemone blanda

Q. I bought some Dutch windflower bulbs. I can't figure out how to place them in the soil.

SW. Yes, these little brick-like rhizomes don't have an obvious shape indicating which way to plant them. You call them Dutch windflowers, but the botanical name is *Anemone blanda*. They are also sometimes called Grecian windflower. They produce beautiful blue, purple, pink or white flowers in spring. The rule is to feel the rhizome for the "nose" on the bumpy side, opposite the more hollowed-out side. But if this does not work, you can simply plant them on their sides and they will right themselves. Plant them 5 to 7.5 centimetres (2 to 3 inches) deep and about 7.5 to 10 centimetres (3 to 4 inches) apart.



Laburnum

Q. A volunteer laburnum popped up in our garden and it's growing very tall (just one long stem). Can we transplant it and how do we keep it small, like a shrub?

SW. It's nice when birds bring us presents. Nature is clever in the way it uses them to distribute seed and guarantees its germination: each seed is deposited with its own starter-fertilizer. Carefully dig up the seedling, place it in a pot, and watch over it. Being in a container will restrict its growth, making pruning unnecessary. I would probably wait until spring to do this, as the trauma of being uprooted before winter could harm the seedling.

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A giant elephant decorates Potters garden store on 48th Avenue in Surrey.



Holly Ferguson shows off the store's animal hats in Surrey.

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