

## Successful Operator Profile: Taking Retail to a 'Hole' New Level

Contributed by Amanda Ryder

Thanks to an exciting new retail concept, shoppers in St. Albert, Alta., can pick up plants for their garden next time they venture out for fresh, organic produce, a hot-from-the-oven loaf of bread, local meats or a relaxing spa experience.

Hole's is one of several retailers housed in the Enjoy Centre and it's an evolution of St. Albert's long-standing garden destination, Hole's Greenhouses & Gardens. Roughly five years ago, owners Jim and Bill Hole, and Bill's wife Valerie, decided that if they wanted to remain in the garden centre business, they would have to make a drastic change. "We looked at where retail was heading and recognized that there was an expectation by customers -- they wanted more from a garden centre," says Jim Hole. The concept was also inspired by a trip that Bill and Valerie made to Europe where Hole says they saw that consumers were looking for an experience and a certain lifestyle when they visited the local garden centre. Retailers across the pond were adding restaurants, little bakeries and food to the mix with great success.

Taking this knowledge into consideration, the Hole family set out to create "a spectacular retail facility to maximize the displays," says Hole. "We also wanted to ensure that we would have people who maybe weren't typically garden centre shoppers, come in and discover gardening." This vision laid the groundwork for a new facility that would bring together local businesses and offer customers a whole new shopping experience.

The Prairie Bistro is a place where shoppers can rest after a busy day of shopping and enjoy regionally inspired cuisine.

The centre's double-pane glass roof lets in lots of natural light.

Such a large-scale change was a risk, but the Holes knew their business had a firm foothold in the community, thanks to a long history and a reputation for great service and products. The operation has been a family endeavour right from the

start -- Lois and Ted Hole and their two sons, Jim and Bill, began with vegetable farming and this soon evolved into plants and gardening, with Hole's opening up shop in 1979. Over the years, the garden centre became widely known as a great resource for quality plants and garden expertise.

The recent expansion paid off for the Hole family when the Enjoy Centre opened in early spring of last year. The facility is two-layered, with 242,000 square feet from top to bottom, 300 employees and eight retail partners in addition to Hole's Greenhouses & Gardens: Amaranth Whole Foods Market, Beautiful Home & Gift Inc., Hillaby's Tools for Cooks, Liquid Harvest, Prairie Bistro, Prairie Baker, SandyView Delicatessen Farms and The Water Garden. The Floral Studio and Events at The Enjoy Centre are also components of Hole's at the Enjoy Centre. The overall retail space of the Enjoy Centre measures 65,000 square feet and features an airy atmosphere with plenty of natural light thanks to the greenhouse's glass roof.

A look inside Beautiful Home & Gift Inc., which specializes in home accents.

A display from the Hole's retail floor, where products are integrated and merchandised together.

Looking specifically at the garden centre itself, Hole and his architects designed the space so that it provided customers with a seamless experience. "In the past we had separation -- we had the bedding plants in one area, the greenhouse in another and we had the indoor plants off to the side in the greenhouse. Now, that's all together in one spot. The bedding plants, the indoor plants are all under one roof and they are all integrated," he says. The result is a retail floor that flows; it's set up with numerous displays to help showcase how green products, garden décor and hard goods can work together to create a great look.

The product line offered by Hole's at the Enjoy Centre has also changed to suit the new location. "I think the one thing that strikes me is that people don't come in with this list of things that they absolutely have to have. It's not a grocery list in a sense -- they come in and they discover. It's a lot of impulse sales." Hole points to a line of children's mitts as an example. Hole's began displaying the mitts, which have cute faces on them, in August and they were an instant hit. "It's incredible how popular they are. Nobody knows ahead of time that they [the mitts] are going to be there, but I think it's that impulse thing. The mix has shifted and will continue to shift," he says. Hole believes that products like bedding plants, perennials, trees and shrubs and indoor plants will always be essential to a garden centre, but there's also room for other offerings like artwork, which he says is on the rise. "There's more of a desire for the art side of things to complement. If you look at the yards, people look for, of course, the plants, but they also look for art in the backyard so it's a blend. Even inside their homes."

The product mix at Hole's has grown to suit the new clientele.

Amaranth Whole Foods Market, another retail partner, offers organic food products and groceries.

Thanks to the new location, the garden centre's demographics have shifted, fulfilling one of Hole's initial goals for the Enjoy Centre. In previous years, Hole's felt that many young customers just didn't see an independent garden centre as a place for them. They were intimidated and, as a result, a younger shopper's first engagement with plants was typically at a chain store. Now, the Enjoy Centre presents this age group with the initial reason to come in -- maybe they are coming to eat at the Prairie Bistro or for a massage at The Water Garden, but they are also taking the time to check out the garden centre. "We still have the same clientele but we are getting that younger demographic, which is really nice to see. I think more of what I'm seeing is younger women that are shopping the store. Also, some young people are coming in to buy groceries, to buy deli products and then they're picking up a bouquet or they're picking up a potted plant and that type of thing," says Hole.

The outdoor dining area of the Prairie Bistro.

Customers can go outside to browse the centre's large selection of trees and shrubs.

Staying true to its roots in the green industry, the Enjoy Centre is outfitted with several eco elements, something the Hole family felt strongly about right from the start. Rainwater is captured and stored for use when watering plants. The greenhouse is outfitted with flood floors, a feature that's becoming more common, where the floor is flooded with water that plants, which are placed on the ground, can draw up. Double-pane glass is used on the entire retail area to minimize heat loss and cogenerators produce electricity for the entire operation. The actual physical footprint has been reduced because the warehouses are located below the greenhouses, allowing the facility to maximize space. Thanks to natural light that shines through the greenhouse roof, there's a smaller demand for incandescent or fluorescent lighting in a good portion of the building.

The building itself is set up to make the most of the event space they have, creating multi-purpose areas that can be used year round. The Enjoy Centre has a meeting area for corporate clients or events as well as a 1,300-square-foot room that transforms from the spring retail area to a venue that accommodates up to 600 people between July and March. In August alone, Hole says they had 47 events booked at the facility and this includes everything from weddings, to banquets to community events. These events also create great crossover business between the retail partners: the Floral Studio is on hand to create floral designs and décor and the partners that deal with food and wine can cater and provide delicious local fare.

As escalator ramp allows shoppers to move their carts between the two levels as they browse the entire centre.

The Prairie Baker is a source for locally made bread, sweets and savouries that are baked fresh daily.

The Enjoy Centre is host to its own in-house events on a regular basis. Every Saturday, "Happenings in the Square" take place in the same spot each week and this is a great opportunity to showcase the various retail partners. The square is below a skywell so customers on the top level can tune in to what's happening on the lower level. Often there are gardening talks by Hole, tai chi demos, floral presentations or cooking classes. On Sundays, there might be music playing, or something similar, to keep the space active and interesting to shoppers.

Events are also tailored to fit the season. In the past year alone, the Enjoy Centre has featured a Valentine's Day event for men called Beers, Burgers and Bouquets (a fundraiser for the Lois Hole Women's Hospital in Edmonton), celebrated the opening of the facility with an event called Plugged In and marked Halloween with Eat, Drink and Be Scary, a day when kids came dressed in costume for tricks and treats. Hole anticipates that the facility's Christmas event will be the biggest one they've had yet.

In terms of customer reaction, Hole says one of the biggest things people remark on is the space itself and the natural light conditions. "You can retail product in a pretty rudimentary space but the comment we get often is that people find the space very uplifting with all the light that comes in. Sometimes in the greenhouse business, you take it for granted but it's something we're featuring," says Hole. "People feel that rejuvenation when they come inside and have that sunlight . . . When the days are dull and it's cold, they come in and have the sunlight streaming through, they feel uplifted and feel like they want to spend more time shopping."

When asked what advice he has for other retailers looking to expand and grow, Hole says the most important thing is to figure out where you want to be in the marketplace, find your focus and be willing to adapt. "The marketplace changes, people's expectations change and if you're not adapting, you will become a dinosaur. That's the thing that people have to be aware of. You have to find out where your niche is, where your strengths are, where your passion lies and then you can go forward with that."

At a Glance:

Company Name: Hole's at the Enjoy Centre

Location: St. Albert, Alta.

Owner: Jim and Bill Hole

Years in Operation: 32

Website: [www.holesonline.com](http://www.holesonline.com)