

# Company is rooted in passion for gardening

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SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Annette Pelliccio chuckles as she recounts how she and her friends would climb the trellis in her parents' backyard and pull ripe mulberries from the vines.

Pelliccio was 4 at the time. Today, years later, she is president of The Happy Gardener, a company rooted in her family's passion for gardening.

The Happy Gardener is a home-based, direct-sales, party-plan business that offers gardening supplies through at-home gardening demonstrations.

## STARTUP SPOTLIGHT

The idea for The Happy Gardener came to Pelliccio one day in April 2003 when she was looking for a business that would allow her to stay home with her daughters, Christina and Angela, who were 1 and 3, respectively, at the time. She was familiar with direct sales, having worked part time for another direct-sales, party-plan company.

"I thought to myself that this could work," she recalled. "My goal was to start the company in 2005, but I couldn't get it out of my head. Three days later, I formed the company. By June, I had my first garden show."

Tammy Wright, president of The Wright Agency, has been helping Pelliccio with her marketing efforts since the company began. Wright created the logo, catalog and Web site.

"Annette is a very innovative thinker," observed Wright. "She's dynamic. She's one of the most honest, forthright individuals I know."

### Bevy of blooming flowers, fruit

Pelliccio's first recollections of gardening date to her grandfather, who owned a home-based yard maintenance company in Long Island, N.Y.

"He loved gardening — that's what I remember about him," Pelliccio said. "I remember he would graft pear trees so that he would have red and green pears on the same tree. I was always amazed by that."

Her parents' gardens provided a bevy of blooming flowers and luscious fruit — strawberries, blueberries and mulberries. "We were in the garden all the time," Pelliccio said.

When Pelliccio was in high school, her parents built the Country Club Landscaping and Aquatic Center in Long Island. She remembers her duties at the full-service garden center.

"I would water everything, clean up the plants and when I got my driver's license would make deliveries. That was my favorite job," she said. "Everybody is happy when they are getting flowers."

After graduating from State University College at Buffalo, Pelliccio married and moved to North Carolina, where she earned a master's degree from North Carolina State University as a reading special-



The Happy Gardener, a home-based, direct-sales, party-plan business, quickly blossomed into a promising career for owner Annette Pelliccio. With her is daughter Christina, 3, who planted the spinach seeds in the family's garden in Ashland.

ist. "My dad wanted me to take over the floral design part of the business, but I always wanted to be a teacher," she said.

Pelliccio and her husband, Nick, spent seven years in North Carolina before moving to Ashland, where Pelliccio taught reading at Henry Clay Elementary School.

One of her first official acts when starting The Happy Gardener was to call the vendors who had worked with her father. She also contacted the company that supplied her grandfather with tools — that company is now making Swedish steel hand tools exclusively for The Happy Gardener.

Pelliccio also sells Sussex trugs, harvesting baskets that her mother's parents used in England to collect eggs and harvest herbs and vegetables. "You can only get them in Sussex," Pelliccio said. "They still use the same techniques they used 200 years ago to make the baskets."

### Overwhelmed by response

In November 2003, after her first five months in business, Pelliccio had 48 people signed up to host home shows the following spring. During those events, Pelliccio would give presentations, teaching people how to design container gardens, for example, or convert from chemical fertilizers to all natural, environmentally friendly techniques.

"We'd also talk about creating different themed gardens — vegetable, herb, flower, bird, butterfly," Pelliccio said.

Pelliccio was overwhelmed by the positive response. Her solution was to create an independent sales force. She now works with 21 independent garden consul-

ants in seven states.

Peggy Williams became an independent senior garden consultant in 2004. "Annette is an extremely bright woman," Williams said. "She's a real go-getter. She came up with this concept. I don't think many people could put together a direct-sales company on their own. I have great admiration for her. She's dynamic."

This year, Pelliccio has added a company Web site, [www.thehappygardener.info](http://www.thehappygardener.info), and redesigned her company catalog.

As part of her business philosophy, Pelliccio works with Plant a Row for the Hungry, a national program that asks people to plant an extra row of vegetables and donate the food to a local food bank. She heard about the organization when she began working with Marion Owen, president of PlanTea Inc., an Alaska company that developed, manufactures and markets an organic fertilizer in easy-to-use tea bags.

"One of the things we like to do when packing and sending PlanTea orders to our customers is to provide 'agniappe,' that is, a little something extra," Owen said.

"When I sent my first order to Annette, I included a bunch of Plant a Row for the Hungry carrot seeds, not really thinking anything of it. This spring, Annette tells me she's not only contacted the Plant a Row people, but she and her associates had set up at least a half dozen Plant a Row projects in different communities. Not only was I amazed at her gumption and follow through, but I was also heartened to know that a small thing [giving seed packets] could become such a wide-reaching project that helps so many peo-

ple."

The Happy Gardener provides a pack of seeds for every guest who wants to participate in the program.

"We did that from the very first show back in 2003," Pelliccio said. "This year we started an official campaign in partnership with the Central Virginia Foodbank. Out of everything I have done so far, that is what I am the most proud of."

Pelliccio's own garden in Ashland is reminiscent of the gardens she remembers from childhood. "We have strawberries and blueberries and blackberries," she said. "We grow grapes, and this year we will have eight raised vegetable beds for the season with all types of vegetables. We also grow roses and edible berries for the birds."

She would like to see her daughters follow in the family's tradition of gardening. Recently, both girls helped their mom soak strawberry plants in buckets of water and then plant them. Christina also planted all the spinach seeds and feeds the birds every day.

While she acknowledges that one day it would be nice to be the Mary Kay of the gardening world, Pelliccio is happy living in the present.

"I'm having a wonderful time with my children," she said. "They are as much involved as I am. I think of how many pounds of produce we are collecting for the hungry in our community. That's what I'm concentrating on now."

• Startup Spotlight, published the third Monday of each month, highlights a Richmond-area business two years old or less.