

# shop profile

By Rich Smith

Photography by Greg Nikas



*In her displays, Cindy Mattson AIFD likes to use strong color. The cloths and Chinese lanterns were her way of creating dramatic impact without spending a lot of money.*

## In Burlington, Mass., Given-Erwin thrives on hard work and smart marketing.

When times turn tough, the tough turn in more time behind the counter—as does Cindy Mattson AIFD, owner of Given-Erwin Florist in Burlington, Mass. Her moderate-sized shop welcomes customers seven days a week instead of the usual five or six.

In the depths of this recession, Cindy finds that being open Monday through Sunday spells the difference between lackluster and sterling income performance. “We had a number of reliable corporate clients who’ve cut way back or entirely eliminated their flower purchases; we’re filling the gap with Sunday walk-in trade,” she says.

Notably, Cindy works solo on Sunday (the remainder of the week, she’s supported by anywhere from three to five part-timers). This helps keep overhead down—no wages to pay on that day. So, even if only one customer comes in and makes a purchase during the entire eight hours the doors are open, Cindy’s still ahead of the game.

In actuality, it almost never happens that just one customer shows up. The cash register rings at least a half-dozen times on any given Sunday. Says Cindy, “I’ve been surprised by the number of people who need flowers on a Sunday. In fact, Sundays tend to be busier than Saturdays. Part of the reason for the higher traffic is the fact that no other shop in town is open that day.”

## Playfully energetic

Some of the Sunday traffic comes from people en route to visit a cemetery where they’ll leave

# Given-Erwin



## **Given-Erwin Florist, Burlington, Massachusetts**

**Owner:** Cindy Mattson AIFD

**Niche:** Full-service floral

**Square footage:** 1,500

**Number of employees:** 5 (all part-time)

flowers at occupied graves. Some of it comes from couples driving around with wedding talk on their lips, who happen to notice the shop open and decide on a lark to stop in for a consult about flowers.

Whatever it is that brings them—and no matter the day—customers entering the shop invariably marvel at its abundant displays of uncommon varieties of rose, hydrangea and orchid bunched by the loose stem in buckets and arrayed with still other rarities in unusual yet tasteful arrangements. “We procure our stock from the Boston Flower Exchange, but also from several trusted wholesalers in the area—one of which gets product such as zinnia, dahlia, and ageratum from growers here under exclusive contract,” she says.

With its cream-tinted walls and hardwood floors, the shop is every bit as cozy as it is unpretentious. Somehow it also manages to be a playfully energetic place: customers all but feel like bursting into a gambol as they make their way from one end of the shop to the other, such is its spirited ambiance. Certainly, with 1,500 square feet of floor space there is adequate room to allow for that sort of thing. Except at Christmastime.

Then, the spaciousness seems to evaporate as Given-Erwin loads up on lavish displays. “We put up as many as 15 Christmas trees throughout the store, each one up to nine feet tall and decorated with its own unique theme,” says Cindy.

## Given take

Given-Erwin opened for business in the early 1970s, founded by a landscaper and situated along the busy main boulevard of downtown Burlington (a Boston suburb of about 30,000 people). Later, the shop transplanted itself to a historic commercial building set among fine old homes in another part of town. The property—used in the 1900s for a meat-smoking plant—was large enough to let Given-Erwin operate a full-service garden center, anchored by an attached greenhouse (back then, the business was well regarded more for its mulch products and seedlings than for cut flowers).

Cindy joined the Given-Erwin team as a floral designer in 1994. Raised in various states (her father was an often-transferred career military man), Cindy’s first exposure to

professional horticulture occurred when, as a Maine seventh-grader, she landed a babysitting job for a family that happened to own a greenhouse. This quickly led to Cindy being invited to work under the glass, minding the parents’ other sprouts.

The greenhouse gig lasted through high school. During her senior year, Cindy made plans to matriculate to a plant-and-soil technology school. However, those plans were plowed under when Cindy discovered the joys of employment at a flower shop. “That was how I spent my Christmas vacation—lending a hand at a local florist,” she says. Immediately after graduation from high school in 1982, Cindy enrolled in the South Florida School of Floral Design. She returned home a few weeks later in possession of a marketable set of basic skills, which she parlayed into a job at a Brewer, Me., retailer of floricultural products. She remained with that shop until the mid-1990s.

At that point, Cindy moved to Massachusetts in order to be geographically closer to her Bay State boyfriend. “I was tired of the four-and-a-half-hour drive to see him,” she

# Given-Erwin

says. To pave the way for this relocation, Cindy sent her résumé around to 10 Massachusetts flower shops and immediately received back 10 offers of employment. She chose to accept the one tendered by Given-Erwin.

The top of the store's food chain was occupied by an absentee owner who delegated day-to-day operations to a husband-and-wife management team. The couple departed in 2001, handing their responsibilities to Cindy on their way out the proverbial door. By late 2003, the owner too was ready to move on and proposed selling the place to Cindy. She agreed and took over as proprietor on Feb. 3, 2004—easily remembered by her as 2/3/4, she jokes.

## Adjusting the focus

Cindy also remembers how everyone in her circle of casual advisors—family, friends and colleagues—warned her against buying the shop. “They thought I was making a huge mistake,” she says. “They saw this shop as a bad risk because it was not a big money maker at the time.”

Appreciated though these pleas for caution were, Cindy decided to toss them to the wind and go forward with the purchase. “In my heart, deep down inside, I knew that this store could be successful. It was in a good location and the local economy was healthy.”

However, soon after acquiring Given-Erwin, Cindy shuttered the garden center (more like bulldozed it: the 5,000 square feet it took up was shortly thereafter converted to a parking lot). “I closed the garden center because, to be viable, it required special equipment and

specialty-skilled personnel—both of which were just too expensive for me,” she says. “And part of what made it expensive was competition. It seemed like everybody and their brother was adding a garden center—or at least putting in a line of seedlings. The killer was the supermarkets that could sell garden products and seedlings at a retail price below our wholesale costs. So I decided that the best thing was to let go of that part of the business and instead focus on flowers.”

## Go with the flow

Today, the most pressing matter is cash flow, and Cindy has taken steps to improve it. “For one, I’ve stopped adding to the number of house accounts we have, while at the same time closing existing ones—and encouraging customers to pay instead with a credit card,” she says. “This reduces the amount of receivables we potentially must carry. Additionally, I’m relying on my Dove point of sale system to generate invoices now daily as opposed to manually—meaning, whenever that task could be gotten around to. Also, if a bill goes unpaid beyond 30 days, I’m right on top of that with a courtesy phone call to remind the customer of the amount due.”

The Dove system also helps Cindy gauge the impact of various business-generating outreach efforts. “It’s been collecting customer information and transaction data for nearly three years now, so there’s a lot that I can analyze.”

A favorite marketing technique of Cindy’s entails having the Dove system produce memory ticklers. “If someone bought flowers a year ago for a birthday or anniversary, I have



*Clapboard outside, paneling inside lend old-fashioned charm.*

# Given-Erwin



*"We've got a lot of space," says Cindy, "and a lot of natural light." Towards the front of the shop, windows on either side of the "sunflower area" keep it bright and cheery. Cindy makes a point of always having fresh flowers out in the shop, not just in the cooler.*

the means to very easily give that person a reminder a week or two in advance of that occasion again this year. I can contact the person by phone or by email or postcard and offer purchase suggestions." Men are particularly appreciative. "They say things like, 'If you hadn't alerted me, I would have completely forgotten to buy flowers. I'd have been up a creek.'"

Cindy finds the reminder in postcard form to be effective for the reason that recipients can tack it to a desk calendar or carry it around with them in their wallet. She also is fond of email because the cost to send a reminder electronically is virtually zero. "Not having to pay any postage, you can send emails frequently—whenever you have a special to advertise," she says, bearing in mind that commercial messages should be kept to a reasonably low frequency.

Cindy occasionally augments the bang of her advertising buck by using flowers in lieu of cash. For example, she worked out a deal wherein a local health club promised her a membership at no charge provided she contributed a fresh arrangement for the gym's reception desk each week. So, in addition to gaining a high-traffic venue out in the community where she could showcase her most cutting-edge ideas ("I attract one or two new customers from the gym each time I bring in an arrangement"), Cindy also obtained access to a fitness studio where she could get physically—and mentally—toned.

## Extreme close-up! Whoa!

She doesn't exactly think of herself as a star of the silver screen, but Cindy does have her own television show—on local-access

cable. "The show I host is a floral design how-to—it's basically free advertising for my shop," Cindy says, explaining that each 30-minute episode costs next to nothing to produce and airs free of charge, the latter being the beauty of cable access (federal law requires that operators of cable systems set aside at least one channel to run programming supplied by ordinary members of the community).

The show's format is relatively simple. It opens with a welcome from the genial producer-announcer who introduces Cindy. The camera cuts to Cindy standing behind a worktable with her materials and tools at the ready. Cindy talks briefly about what she's going to create and then starts in on it, describing each step as she goes or making pleasant small talk as necessary to hold audience interest during tedious-to-watch tasks. At least one episode per season

# Given-Erwin

departs from floral how-to in order to spotlight planting and soil care.

New episodes of Cindy's show roll out at the rate of about one every 60 days, although each installment plays dozens of times at odd hours of the day and night for weeks on end. The show is recorded at a nearby high school equipped with a professional-grade studio that students interested in careers in broadcasting use to learn the video arts. Amazingly, Cindy never seems to run out of design ideas to talk about—even though she has been talking about flower arranging on this program since 2001. Usually, she keys the theme of each episode to the nearest floral holiday.

One episode of which she is particularly proud was recorded for school prom season two years ago. Its focus was on the making of wire corsage wristlets. This well-watched presentation, combined with a promotion that put freebie wristlets on the hands of a select number of local high school girls, helped ignite demand for the product at subsequent proms. "As a result, my corsage

business in 2009 was double what it was in 2007," says Cindy.

## A demonstrably good idea

Cindy landed the TV gig by invitation: a producer of cable-access programming saw her give a presentation to a garden club and thought she'd be a sensation on the tube.

"Demonstrations—whether you do them before a group of five in your shop or an audience of hundreds at a community center—are great for bringing you more business," she says. Consider, for example, the design classes for retirees taught by Cindy. "I was contacted by the senior center here in Burlington; they wanted me to do a one-time thing where I'd show the elderly how to make floral arrangements. Ten ladies showed up for this event—and so did the local newspaper to photograph it all. Everyone had such a great time that the senior center ended up asking if I'd like to do this on a regular basis. So now the class is

held once a month. Each time there are a good 30 people in attendance." At this workshop, Cindy charges a mere \$10 per person—just enough to cover the costs of the materials she brings from the shop. Where she makes the real money is from referred business. "My elderly participants tell their adult sons and daughters about the class and have nice things to say about me, the shop and the flowers, which interests those sons and daughters in becoming customers. I've gotten a surprising amount of new business this way."

Another boost to the bottom line could come from Cindy's plan to build up certain seasonal offerings. Right now, she's mainly thinking prom products. "The one thing I've noticed about teenagers: they don't blink when you tell them a large price. It's as if they have no real concept of money." To encourage their purchases of corsages and other floral accouterments associated with the big dance, Cindy says she will hold a prom open house. At press time, no date had yet been set for this proposed event. But, how much would anyone care to bet that the event takes place on a Sunday? 🌿



*A table in the wedding consultation area at Given-Erwin is stocked with laminated cards featuring designs from a wedding portfolio book that Cindy produced. "I take them with me when I go to wedding expos and do demonstrations," Cindy notes. "They've been a great marketing tool."*