

INTERIOR PLANTSCAPE CONTRACTORS SEEK RECOGNITION IN LIGHT OF GROWTH

By Bruce F. Shank, Editor

Now an \$80 million market, interior plantscaping needs special consideration from architects, researchers, and growers



The interior plant design, installation and maintenance business is possibly the greatest beneficiary of changing standards within the professional landscape horticulture industry in the last decade. Furthermore, it is likely to be one of the fastest growing Green Industry businesses in the 1980's.

So it is no surprise that interior plantscape firms want to be recognized as a unique and important part of our professional plant care world.

Currently estimated at \$80 million in installation and maintenance, the interior plantscape business has three major needs; to educate the landscape architect about the differences between interior and exterior plant materials, to develop technical support from extension and foundation research, and to find trained and self-disciplined maintenance people. These three needs are the reasons why interior plantscape businessmen want a specific identity that will make an impact on landscape architects, tropical plant growers, and educational institutions.

Three associations currently serve this type of business; the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA), the Interior Plantscape Association (IPA), and the Society of American Florists (SAF). Many interior plantscape firms belong to all three. Most of the original organizational work was in SAF and through an annual tropical plant workshop held each January at the Agricultural Research Center in Apopka, FL. ALCA and IPA appear to be making a greater effort to serve the interior plantscape businessman than SAF at the moment. Both are in the process of establishing standards and technical guidance to counteract any bad reputation caused by fly-by-night operators taking advantage of a healthy market.

One major weakness in the interior plantscape industry could be that many people in the business have backgrounds totally unrelated to horticulture. They have learned by trial and error and may lack some of the knowledge important when problems arise. It also gives the market that 'anyone else can do it' appearance, which is no longer the case. When you consider the risk of guaranteeing large interior plantscapes, a small, undercapitalized business could get wiped out by one technical flaw in a maintenance program.

The interior plantscape business has become sophisticated big business. In many cities landscape architects recognize the expertise of the interior plantscape firm and consequently consult or subcontract interior tropical plant design to them.

The business has already withstood one invasion by good intentioned but unskilled 'flower children' in the 70's. It has grown out of the tropical plant store, the florist shop, and the nursery into a service business, often outgrowing the business that originally launched it. Any idea of interior plantscaping being a passing fad can be refuted by the healthy and continued success of firms started in the early 60's.

Jerry Leider and his Tropical Plant Rentals in Chicago are cases in point. Leider, who started his business in 1963, now runs the biggest interior plantscape operation in the U.S. He talks about the first 17 years;



Tall ficus trees tower over diners
in the Colony Square Hotel, Atlanta, GA
(Photo courtesy IPA).

"We started in the midst of a building boom in the early 60's. Lady Bird Johnson traveled the country urging protection and beautification of our environment. Architects began designing buildings with atriums and lobbies for tropical plants. Hyatt Regency Hotels are one example of interior landscaping that received tremendous exposure and publicity. In the early 70's, the small tropical plant store grew by leaps and bounds posing a temporary problem as they attempted maintenance work. By the mid-70's this business leveled off and we settled down to concentrate on improving the technology of interior plantscaping."

Don Mastick, president of Foliage Plant Systems in Clifton, N.J., traces interior plantscaping back to 1869 and a German immigrant named Brers who started an exotic plant nursery in New Jersey. Key factors in the growth and sophistication of the market were, according to Mastick, educating the landscape architect that specifications for outdoor plant material did not match those needed for interior material; the development of commercial species specifically for interior plantscaping, and more sophisticated accounting practices by the interior plantscaper to insure himself against losses to guaranteed plants.

Mastick has used computers to keep track of costs for more than three years. He uses the computer to control loss rates, plant lists and costs from growers, and perform inventory.

"The attractiveness of the business is that it is not capital intensive," Mastick said. "However, when

the new company grows to the point that a second and third person are hired and can't be supervised all the time, and one of these individuals is taking care of \$20,000 worth of plants and for one reason or another loses a fourth of them, then the small business does not have the cash to handle the guarantee. It's the management of people that is so difficult. The technician has to be out there on an honor basis because the small firm can't afford the overhead of job foremen."

Harry Belin, president of Indoor Gardens in Alexandria, VA, and president of IPA, has been involved with interior plantscaping for about five years. In this time, he has noticed too many architects and designers associate the interiors with the exteriors. He has spent many hours trying to have specifications altered to practical levels. "We have seen bid specifications for interior work containing magnolia grandiflora, azaleas, gardenias and jasmine," said Belin. There was too much confusion, and not enough of a specific identity to make an impact to let people know there were some major differences between interior and exterior plantscapes."

Until recently, it was the grower and production specialists who gave the most advise to interior plantscapers. The short course in Apopka, FL, each January still remains the essential course for the field. The three-way relationship between grower, extension, and plantscape firm helped achieve changes such as acclimatization by shading, artificial soils, and larger material. But the grower's interest is still using his greenhouses as efficiently as possible and the extension service in Florida is there to serve primarily the grower. Research from the position of the interior plantscape firm is needed. Some is underway, at universities such as Ohio State, California Polytechnic Institute, Rutgers, and North Carolina State. Support for this research could speed up such possible improvements as low light tolerant hybrids, more labelled insecticides for interior use, and precise nutrient needs under indoor conditions. Efficient lighting in the needed red and blue wavelengths for plants needs to be pushed on a display rather than a greenhouse level. Temperature and humidity reac-

tions by specific plants need to be studied more precisely. Hardiness in general needs to be estimated for each commonly used tropical or semitropical plant.

Meantime, ALCA and IPA are working on maintenance and design standards. IPA is considering a certification program, based on a manual it is now developing. ALCA is holding regional and national sessions on interior plantscaping and IPA is planning a major meeting in September in Dallas and full support of the Apopka program this coming January. State florist associations are strengthening their programs in the area of interior plantscaping.

If industry data were tabulated, universities and technical schools might offer programs to train technicians. Specific informational needs should be spelled out by the associations, developed by qualified individuals, and made available. All this is very likely in the next three years.

So far it appears that energy considerations have had no effect on the market. Reduced energy for heat and lighting only further strengthens the need for research. Offering affordable conversions to older buildings not originally designed for plants will perhaps create a renovation specialty within the field. The demand for residential plantscapes may be the niche for small or new firms.

Even though the market grew out of the floral business, it resembles in many ways the services offered by the landscape contractor (exterior); installation, maintenance, and sometimes design. However, the plant material is more aligned to the floral industry. Being in the middle, members of this field should participate in both. The management aspects of landscape contracting are important to know and the special care knowledge of the florist is equally valuable. Neglect either side and you may get in trouble.

So far, interior plantscape professionals seem to realize this and hold memberships in both ALCA and SAF. Whether IPA can consolidate both specialties into one organization is yet to be seen, but certainly its efforts are worthy of support. Perhaps membership in all three is the best answer for now.

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Plants create relaxed atmosphere at a cocktail area in the Colony Square Hotel. (Photo courtesy IPA)

