



Interiorscape Hall of Fame



Barbara Helfman 1997 Allied Trade Professional

Barbara Helfman Barbara Helfman has excelled in four distinct areas of endeavor within the interiorscape industry; interiorscaper, container inventor and manufacturer, industry leader and activist and tireless educator. Truly a remarkable woman!

Her career began in 1975, in the bustling metropolis of Middletown, a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. For several years she had been intrigued by the concept of plant rental, although having no horticultural knowledge herself. With two friends she opened a gift shop that also rented plants. Barbara tells that, "After a year, we realized that we were spending 80% of our time for 20% of our income on the gift shop and 20% of our time for 80% of our income from the plant rental end." The gift shop was closed and Something Different Interior Plantscaping was born.

Despite the usual trials inherent in small business development, the company continued to grow and prosper over the next twenty-two years, acquiring numerous awards over the years for Christmascaping, special events and interiorscape design, installation and maintenance. Her most prestigious project was the installation of 800 Natural Springs planter in the 350 rooms and suites of the famous Plaza Hotel in New York, an account they serviced for four years.

Most interiorscape owners find that the rigors of establishing and maintaining a viable business was more than enough of a challenge, however, Barbara's drive and creativity enabled her to step up to new challenges.

Approximately 15 years ago, she identified an industry need and was determined to fill it. The open plan office concept was becoming extremely popular with business and industry. Unfortunately, the nature of its design configuration severely limited floor space. Barbara conceived the idea of a planter that could be fixed to the top of the office wall partitions. This innovation would allow the widespread use of foliage while creating a very ordered and aesthetic appearance.

The cost of launching the business was daunting. Expensive injection molds, tooling and major advertising campaigns were necessary to even attempt the first sale. Success was by no means guaranteed even if everything went smoothly. A single mistake could spell financial disaster.

Barbara's indomitable will overcame fear and she began her quest for a solution. Unafraid to seek answers from the experts, she quickly learned to conduct intensive research and went straight to the biggest office partition manufacturer in the country, Steelcase. With their input, she finally arrived at the final design for TOPSiders, the container answer to open plan office spaces.

The first year of production was very slow, and Barbara agonized that she made the wrong decision. Subsequently however, TOPSiders were specified for the largest office project in the United States that year and thousands were shipped. That one job made all the difference and Barbara has never looked back.

Today, TOPSiders are a well-recognized staple in the industry, enabling thousands of office workers to enjoy live foliage amid cubicle work spaces. Barbara has said that she would like the following epitaph on her tombstone, "I found a new place to put plants!" A just tribute to this creative and persevering woman.

By the early 90's, Something Different had become the largest interiorscape company in Cincinnati and had over 30 employees. However, Barbara had become more and more distracted by her many endeavors including TOPSiders. In order to devote more time to these endeavors, Barbara and her remaining partner, Dan Shoemaker, agreed to the acquisition overture by Tru-Green Chemlawn in June, 1995.

Barbara has always given back to the industry that supports her, leaving an enviable record of service on various industry boards as well as her ceaseless efforts to educate interiorscapers. TOPSiders is a Charter Exhibitor at CalScape and one of the only five vendors to have exhibited at all the CalScape Expositions. She was one of the original regional representatives on the original Interior Plantscape Association board of directors. She served 18 years on the Ohio Florist Associations Interiorscape Planning Committee, where she is credited with establishing an interiorscape seat on the board. She was subsequently elected and served for three years in this position being the first interiorscaper, and a woman at that, to serve on the OFA Board . Barbara has also served on the ALCA-IPD Board and the NCIHC, our certification board.

Barbara willingly shares her knowledge and experience for the betterment of interiorscaping through public speaker at regional and national associations in the industry and her regular column in Interiorscape Magazine. Barbara remain approachable to both horticultural technicians as well as company owners.

