



Arboretum Home and Garden Heaven is a second generation family run business with two sites in Leighlinbridge, Carlow and Kilquade, Wicklow. Ireland's first five star garden centre was founded by Executive Chairperson Rachel Doyle and is now managed by her sons, Barry Doyle, as CEO, and Fergal Doyle, as CCO. Emerging from humble beginnings (its first operations were based out of a home garage), Arboretum has evolved into a lifestyle experience with a garden centre, pet store, garden café, home & gift and furniture areas.

We spoke to **Rachel Doyle** about the business founding, family involvement and succession.

**Q. What inspired you to enter this industry?**

**A.** Having gone back to horticultural college aged 22, which wasn't the norm over 40 years ago, and having a passion for my chosen subject, I was determined to start up a garden centre. I inherited my love for gardening from my dad, who had a lovely ornamental garden when we were children, but more importantly growing up and living in a rural setting of Clonmore on the Carlow/Wicklow border. The local shops were basic but our family were self-sufficient, growing all our own fruit and vegetables.

**Q. Describe how the business has evolved.**

**A.** As a young horticulturist just married to Frank and coming to live in Leighlinbridge (Carlow), I with the help of Frank, my dad and extended family set up Arboretum. Frank had built a bungalow on a third of an acre site and this was the site for our new venture. Our up-and-over garage door was the shop window, and the garage was our shop and potting shed. It was hard work with never enough hours in the day. Later, we decided to move to a more central location in Carlow town. We rented a site and this went from strength to strength so we bought an old house on six acres near the village of Leighlinbridge and some years later bought the ten acre field that accompanied it.

Then, along came Aldi and Lidl who both wanted our Carlow site. My belief is "*that an opportunity has to be realised in the lifetime of the opportunity*" so we sold to Aldi and now had some money to build a lovely new Arboretum on our ten acre site; a dream come true. We had made many mistakes (no major ones) on the previous moves and were adamant this time we would get it as right as we possibly could.



Arboretum has evolved very much into a destination experiential place to visit. In 2015, we opened a second 5.2 acre site at The National Garden Exhibition Centre, Kilquade, Wicklow. People come for plants, for stylish inside or outdoor furniture for unique gifts and for the latest fashion as there is something for everyone. Our visitors may come for breakfast, go for a walk in the inspirational gardens, experience a bit of retail therapy and then have a bit of lunch. It is a complete day out.

**Q. What initial challenges did you confront?**

**A.** There were many challenges along the way and on reflection one common thread was the fact that I was in a male dominated business and customers expected that they would be dealing with a man. I would commonly get asked *“if the man of the house was in”, “could they speak to the ‘boss’?”* and many more statements expressing these sentiments.

I was invited by the Carlow Nationalist and the Leinster Times to write a weekly article on gardening which I did for about 16 years. This article had my headshot and this gave me increased credibility and acceptance for the fact that I, as a woman, might also know about all things gardening.

**Q. Describe the next generation's involvement in the family business?**

**A.** It's a dream come true that our two sons, Fergal and Barry, came back into the family business. Fergal is the Chief Commercial Officer (CCO) and looks after all the finances and future developments on the two sites. Barry is Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and looks at the overall running of the business and also working with Fergal on future plans. I'm Executive Chair and work with Fergal and Barry. While we have very different personalities we get on so well and respect each other's opinions. They keep me in the loop but I am very happy to say they are very capable young men and will bring the company to new heights.



*Barry, Frank, Rachel and Fergal Doyle.*

***Q. Did you actively encourage your sons Fergal and Barry to enter the business or was it an organic progression?***

**A.** We never forced our sons and actually discouraged them from coming into the business to make sure they followed their own dreams. Fergal studied business and Barry followed in my footsteps and studied horticulture. I know from Barry's early interest in plants he would probably end up working in some aspect of horticulture. I feel very blessed to sit down every morning in our café and have breakfast with my Frank and my sons and we also lunch together when we are all onsite.



***“We are always willing to buy in the expertise we don't have.”***

***Q. How did the succession planning process unfold?***

**A.** The succession planning process has been an ongoing scope of work for a number of years. We had many meetings around the kitchen table and the boardroom table with the wise council and mentoring from our great friend and adviser Blaise Brosnan. From the Management Resource Institute (MRI) we came up with the strategic plan of what we believed was the right structure for Arboretum going forward. We are all happy with this work arrangement and I don't think we could work any better together mainly because our roles are clarified and there's no ambiguity about another's role.



**Q. What do you consider the advantages and disadvantages of family business?**

**A.** I can honestly say working in a family business has only advantages. I feel honoured I work with the three men in my life: Frank, Fergal and Barry. We respect each other and are always willing to listen to the others' points of view. We are also always willing to buy in the expertise we don't have.

**Q. How is portraying the business as family run and owned significant to the Arboretum brand?**

**A.** We have worked long and hard at establishing the Arboretum brand; a brand that portrays the family ethos of customer care, quality and value. I believe Irish people like the fact they are supporting an Irish company. We employ over 120 people in both stores and we believe in the saying *"people buy from people first and product second"*. I know Arboretum is in safe hands with Fergal and Barry and maybe it will last another generation as we have five wonderful grandchildren, maybe some of them may decide in a career in horticulture too.

