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BEST IN CLASS
Switzerland
Family tree

Keen to keep business in full bloom, this garden centre offers so much more than its plants.

By Marie-Sophie Schwarzer
 Photographer Robert Huber

Nature is a foreign frontier for many city slickers. But that's not the case in Switzerland, where the Alps, forests and lakes are rarely out of sight. This proximity to the great outdoors helps the Swiss to cherish it – but does it mean that they're born with green fingers? Erwin Meier-Honegger (pictured, below), certainly was. His great-grandparents founded a garden centre in 1894 and he's now the fourth-generation owner. Located in the canton of Zürich, surrounded by fields and mountains,

Meier is a family-run affair that has reinvented itself to keep up with the times without losing sight of its roots.

“Growing up, the garden centre was my playground,” says Meier-Honegger. “The company was our extended home and so I had the natural urge to escape and explore the world.” He agreed to join the business only when his father helped him realise that travel would be part of the job and so, after completing his training in Geneva, he returned home to work at Meier.

When Meier-Honegger took up the reins with his sister Bettina Walser-Meier in 2012, he helped transform the business. It started out as a nursery and mail-order firm selling seeds but has become a destination: some patrons travel 50km to pick up a new pot plant, grab a bite to eat at the on-site restaurant and then seek advice on how to take care of their newly bought leafy cohabitants. “We're like a mountain hut,” says Meier-Honegger when talking about the visitors who spend hours walking among the jungle of ferns, trees and saplings.

In brief:

Who: Meier is a family business headed by Erwin Meier-Honegger and his sister Bettina Walser-Meier, who are helped by their father Erwin Meier-Albrecht.

What: Meier is a garden centre with character that sells hard-to-find plants that are grown in the family's nursery.

Where: In Dürnten, a half-hour train ride from central Zürich, so Meier is within easy reach. Surrounded by farmland and mountains, this is a fitting spot for a garden centre.

Report card: The plants at Meier are hard to beat and so is the service. Meier-Honegger and his father are always on hand to help and the team host workshops and consultations. Meier-Honegger is keen on setting a positive example by moving away from pesticides and planting façades, rooftops and balconies to create greener cities. He shares insights in his monthly magazine, *Pflanzenfreund*.

What to buy:

Seedlings: People drive for hours to pick up seedlings – from mint to tomato plants.

Cannabis: This variety (pictured, above) is ornamental and makes a fetching balcony bloom.

Azaleas: These flowering shrubs are at their best in the spring and are a good alternative to the ubiquitous boxwood on balconies and in gardens.

Birdhouse: Why not pick up a birdhouse handmade by Swiss native Andy Junker at his workshop in Bennwil, Basel-Landschaft. His boxes are suitable for all types of birds, from sparrows to starlings, and each one is made from local wood. There's even a bird hotel on offer – the more the merrier.

Geraniums: These beautiful blooms can be spied adorning balconies throughout Switzerland. Apart from the seedlings, geraniums are probably the most popular plant sold at Meier.

The idea of what a garden centre should look like has changed over the years. The US was long considered old fashioned for its wild approach and all eyes were on the Netherlands' shiny greenhouses – but recently the former has become relevant again. “People are looking for something authentic,” says Meier-Honegger. “They want to escape into a wholesome world, not [get stuck in] a commercial trap.” While Meier sells everything from berry bushes to Ilse Jacobsen raincoats, Meier-Honegger is keen to create an experience, particularly in the outdoor show gardens where regional shrubs grow freely.

March to June are the busiest months for Meier, the rest of the year is about selling books and boots. Moreover, as bigger trees have become harder to sell, pot plants have spread across the shop floor. “There's a shortage of land,” says Meier-Honegger. “Back in the day a Ferrari was a status symbol; today it's a garden.” There are thousands of plants to choose from, including geraniums for covered balconies and even cannabis (a low-THC variety is legal in Switzerland).

Long unchanged, the gardening industry is embarking on a new chapter. “Pesticides and fertiliser – the things that historically made money – are out of favour. The old business model doesn't work anymore,” says Meier-Honegger. “My generation sees it as a chance to reinvent the business. We want to expand our expertise as a nature consultant, offering soil analysis and personalised services. We also grow our own plants so we can afford to offer specialties and rarities that no one else can.”

Natasha Schmid and her father have been coming to Meier for years. “We drive for an hour to get here – this is by far the most beautiful garden centre,” she says. Meier-Honegger and his father, Erwin Meier-Albrecht, know them well. “I've been assisting two, three generations of families,” says Meier-Albrecht, who originally wanted to become a football star in England. But he grew into the family business and hasn't looked back. “This is our life, our hobby, our passion.” — (M) meier-ag.ch

