

Mark Holler

An Interview with the Owner of Ginkgo Gardens

BY STEPHANIE DEUTSCH

When Mark Holler was growing up in a big family in Hickory, North Carolina, he thought he was destined to be an engineer. He could fix just about anything from a vacuum cleaner to the lawn mower, had a soldering gun in his room and, in the days before remote control, a radio he had rigged so he could turn it on and off without getting out of bed. But half way through college a tedious lecture on railroads switched something for him; he realized that it was his other hobby – gardening -- that he truly loved. He changed his major to landscape horticulture and, despite the fact that “my dad thought I was nuts,” he says, he hasn’t looked back.

Today Mark is the owner of Ginkgo Gardens, a shop geared to urban living that sells a full array of products from trees, shrubs, and annuals to bags of flower-friendly insects to pottery and lawn furniture. Ginkgo Gardens also offers services from residential garden design and installation to maintenance – weekly, monthly, by season or one-time clean-ups. The store at 911 Eleventh St. SE (www.ginkgogardens.com), founded in 1999, was the first business to win one of Councilmember Tommy Wells’s “Liveable Walkable Community” awards two years ago.

Looking back, Mark can see that he learned a great deal by watching his father who, in midlife, having been laid off from a job with Texaco, followed his dream and opened a small barbecue restaurant. Home from college on weekends, Mark would “curb-hop, to my dismay.” He would also observe his parents. His father was hardworking, well organized and careful with money. His mother kept the books for the restaurant. “It all worked.”

It was a few years after his 1979 graduation from North Carolina State that Mark made the move to the Washington, DC area and quickly discovered that his favorite neighborhood here was Capitol Hill. His first apartment was at 16th and C, SE where he got a reduction in the rent by taking care of the building’s yard. “I made a deal with the local drug dealers,” he remembers. “I wouldn’t call the police on them if they would stay off my clematis.” Soon he was working seven days a week, part time in yard care and part time in real estate, and saving money. An accident in which no one was hurt but his car was totaled gave him the cash to buy a lawn mower and a work van. Courses at the University of Maryland added more detailed knowledge about local plants and climate. He began building a crew of workers and landed a few big maintenance contracts including the Folger Library and the Washington, DC Historic Society near Dupont Circle. Soon he had enough work in the neighborhood to quit real estate and turn down clients in the suburbs.

Mark remembers traveling frequently to Maryland or Virginia to find the plants he needed for clients’ gardens, and thinking he would like to open a nursery on the Hill. Initially people told him “that’s not something you do in the city” and, indeed, it took ten years to find just the right spot. But when he saw the For Sale sign on an old liquor store at 911 11th Street Mark remembers that “I could not stop fast enough.” He immediately felt, “this is my space.” The financing was tricky because, “Of course it was more than I wanted to spend. I could buy the building but I couldn’t afford to pay people to do the work to clean it up.” So the garden crew he had built up over the years helped him clear out the old beer coolers and in 1999 Ginkgo Gardens was born. “I chose the name because the ginkgo tree represents stamina, history and longevity,” he explains saying he remembers when, as a college student, he first noticed the beauty of golden ginkgo leaves carpeting the earth in the fall. He notes that ginkgo leaves have been found in fossils hundreds of thousands of years old and that a few ginkgo trees survived the atomic bomb blast at Hiroshima. The day Ginkgo Gardens opened Mark wondered, “Will anyone come?” They did – from all over the city and especially from Capitol Hill.

In addition to running his landscaping business and the shop, Mark has continued his professional education with a two and



TOP TO BOTTOM: Mark Holler. Photo by Stephanie Deutsch.

Mark Holler, helped by a local Brownie Troop, created this spectacular garden at the Southeast Library. Photo by Melissa Ashabranner.

a half year course called Garden Center University taught in five different cities all over the U.S. by English garden expert Ian Baldwin, and has made significant contributions to the neighborhood as a volunteer. Several years ago a summer drought threatened the survival of the double row of newly planted crab apple trees on the Pennsylvania Ave., SE median strip. Mark decided he "couldn't sit by and watch them die" so he went to a fire supply house, got a wrench to open hydrants and an adapter to attach garden hoses to them and set to work. A small grant from the Capitol Hill Community Foundation allowed him to hire help and local businesses like Frager's cooperated but, basically, he says, "I spent all my weekends watering those trees."

More recently, a local Brownie troop asked his help in creating a service project -- cleaning up the grounds of the Southeast library on Seventh Street where the weeds were five feet tall. Mark agreed and then realized that the project was bigger than he had anticipated. The Brownie moms were high energy and well organized, doing everything from pulling weeds with their daughters to holding fundraising parties. Over the course of two years the grounds of the library were transformed and Mark, who donated not just his own time but the participation of his staff, says, "We all had fun."

Now commuting around the Hill on a beat up old bike, Mark is trying to think more green. He has introduced a line of organic lawn care products and is pushing the use of low maintenance, native plants for gardens. "We are borrowing this earth from our children," he says. "We have to retrain ourselves so we can give it back in better shape than we found it." ★



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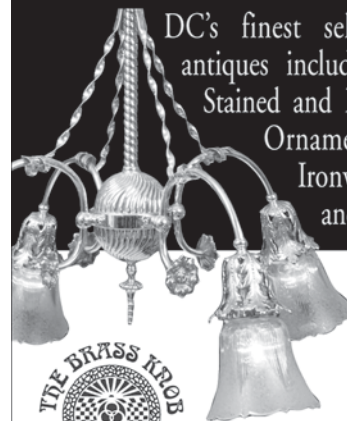
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