

# Rockledge Gardens remains all in the family

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(Photo: MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY)

Theresa Riley thinks farming's always been in her blood.



The co-owner of Rockledge Gardens talks about The Farm there and the business' history. Video by Sara Paulson Posted April 22, 2014

"I do remember when I was 10, my dad gave me a vegetable garden for a birthday present," Theresa says. "He wrote out in the card that he was going to help me plan and plant a vegetable garden. And to help me to take care of it — weed."

Her dad followed through. And so did Theresa's passion for growing things.

It makes sense. Her father was Harry Witte, who founded Rockledge Gardens 54 years ago. Taking part in the family business was a rite of passage for Theresa and her five older siblings.

But sticking around to run the place? That wasn't in her master plan. But feelings — and plans — change.

In addition to running Brevard's biggest garden center and nursery, Theresa and her husband, Kevin, branched out into produce. Two years ago, they opened a hydroponic vegetable farm — dubbed The Farm at Rockledge Gardens — which uses natural methods for growing food.

"We just really want people to be excited about local food and healthy food," Theresa says. "We just find it very, very rewarding growing the vegetables and watching things grow and finding out how tasty they are."

To Theresa, it's a natural progression of her business and her life's passions.

"This is very much home," she says. "I really don't think it was a sense of obligation at all. I never dreamt our kids would be involved in any way, shape or form. I think it's just something that kind of becomes a part of you."

Lifelong friend Mary Helen King sees that.

"Theresa lives, drinks and eats Rockledge Gardens," King says. "The farm, she is very passionate about. She's done a lot of research with that. She doesn't go at it without her background and researching it and talking to people about it."

## **Born into business**

Theresa, born Sept. 11, 1958, at Wuesthoff Hospital in Rockledge, is the youngest child of Harry and Mary Witte.

Harry, who'd served in the Navy and was stationed in Jacksonville, took up a second post-military career farming cabbage. A couple of hard winters later, he opted instead to grow flower bulbs. That eventually morphed into a bulb packing plant, roadside soil stand and the nursery that became Rockledge Gardens.

"All of my brothers and sisters through high school and different stages of their life helped out at the garden center," Theresa says.

Mary Helen has known Theresa since they were both babies. "We carved our names and sayings in the headboard at her house," King says.

When Theresa was 15 and attending Rockledge High, she met her future husband, Kevin Riley, then 16.

Kevin says he was drawn to Theresa's free spirit, as well as "her love of life, love of people. She just really likes helping people and working with people."

Kevin graduated in 1975; Theresa, a year later, but she skipped her senior year of to attend then-Brevard Community College.

Both went on to attend Florida State University. Kevin sought his degree in mass communications and marketing; Theresa wanted to go into social work.

But both were fond of their time at the garden center, so they minored in horticulture at nearby Florida A&M.

Good thing.

"I kind of knew as soon as I did that semester of internship (in social work) that it wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," Theresa says. "I just got very emotionally attached to all of the clients. ... I didn't think I could have a life and that kind of job."

Theresa believes helping others is "more of a lifestyle than a job. It can be utilized in every aspect of your life."

During her schooling, she kept going back to the family business and helping out. So did Kevin. When they finished college, "We just kind of both decided *this is what we want to do. We got very involved in the business.*"

Kevin never imagined a high school job would end up being his livelihood.

"She got me the job here pulling weeds, and (I'm) still pulling weeds," Kevin says.

The couple married on March 11, 1979. "We have been managing Rockledge Gardens for most of that time," Theresa says.

Running a business with a spouse, while daunting to some, seems to be key here.

"It's challenging, but it works for us because we know each other's strengths and liabilities, so we accept that, and we fill in the blanks where needed," Kevin says. "So we rarely have conflicts. We'll discuss it. It's a good mix."

Theresa admits she sometimes gets teased about not being a businessperson.

"I would actually tell you I'm really not," she says. "I'm more into 'Do what you think is right and feels good and helping the most people' kind of thing, which ... not always goes hand in hand with business."

She knows there's a fine line there.

"Kevin and I are a pretty good balance," Theresa says. "He's a number cruncher. We say that I'm the heart and he's the head of the business, which makes a nice team. And now with our kids involved, too, they're kind of the energy and the spirit."

The couple have three children: Joseph, 32; Aurelia, 29; and John Michael, 26. All earned their keep at the business during their own high school years. The older two, along with their spouses, remain a part of Rockledge Gardens.

"It's just great, having them involved," Theresa says.

Harry Witte died in 1998. Mary is 93 and lives with Theresa and Kevin. "She still comes in every day," Theresa says. "Almost every day. She does the bookwork at home. But she loves to come in and walk around a little bit."

Mary Helen is awed by her lifelong friend's devotion to her mom.

"I'm not sure if people walking into the business would know the time and care and love she gives to her mother, having her at her house and living there with her," says Mary Helen, who did the same with her own mom. "There aren't a lot of us in our generation that do that or can do it, and it's a natural part of her life. Her mother is part of her life, and it's not a caretaking role. It's just part of the family role."

### **Charitable contributions**

Theresa says a big part of her very busy life also includes giving back. She and Kevin are active in Keep Brevard Beautiful, Habitat for Humanity and their parish, St. Mary's Catholic Church of Rockledge.

Linda Adams is chief operations officer at the Florida Nursery Growers and Landscaping Association. She has known Theresa and her family since she began working there nearly 30 years ago and considers her a friend.

"Her father ... was active in the association and helped get our professional certification program going," Linda says. "I think he set a model for Theresa to be active, not only in their community but in the industry."

Linda says Theresa is chairperson of the Tropical Plant Industry Exhibition, a nursery and landscaping trade show. It's a prestigious volunteer position, and the show is well-known in the industry, Adams says. "She brings so much enthusiasm and so much energy, and she just is very positive," she says.

When Linda and Theresa have traveled to Asheville, N.C., for conferences, the Riley home is always open. "She just has such a generous spirit," Linda says. "I stay with them, and I think she's like that not just with me, with anyone she can be helpful with."

Theresa also makes sure to save time for her church. She often is involved in decorating there (as well as donating supplies to do so). During a church youth group trip to Asheville, the Rileys helped build a house with Habitat for Humanity.

"As soon as Habitat started here, we're like, 'Oh, we really want to be involved,'" Theresa says of donating landscaping supplies. "So we made that commitment here whenever they finished a house. We love Habitat for Humanity."

### **Branching into hydroponics**

In 2012, the Rileys decided to dip into growing produce via a vertical hydroponic farm on the east side of U.S. 1.

"We love Disney, and we go to Epcot frequently," Theresa says, noting they celebrated their recent anniversary at Epcot International Flower and Garden Festival. "Truly, one of my favorite rides is The Land pavilion, and the whole thing where they're growing the vegetables hydroponically."

There was a spark in her to grow food like that.

"When we started The Farm and started growing things from seed, it was almost like life-giving," Theresa says. "Because to watch something develop from a tiny seed and see that little sprout and watch it grow just kind of blew my mind."

Among the offerings: at least 20 vegetables and fruits, including carrots, tomatoes, kale, squash, okra, celery and pick-them-yourself herbs. The farm is open Wednesdays and Saturdays. Locally produced eggs, meat, dairy, bread, jams and more are featured from other sellers.

"We're finding that it is a community building experience," she says. "People who come to the market love to tell us how they fix food."

The Farm will host a Farm to Table Spring Tapas dinner May 25, the second of its kind hosted by Rockledge Gardens.

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As for the future, Theresa is just enjoying her business one step at a time. Will her kids follow suit and take over eventually? Sure, she'd love them to stay involved, but she doesn't demand it.

She's not even thinking about that now. "We plan to be here quite a bit longer," she says.

Hopes are to continue to help people appreciate and respect the environment.

"I think we all get so kind of in the spin of life, and we kind of forget the good that's right in front of us sometimes," Theresa says. "And I think that's one of the great things about nature, is that it slows us down if we take time to really observe it."

### **If you go**

What:

Space Coast Farm to Table: Spring Tapas Dinner

When:

5 to 8 p.m. May 25

Where:

The Farm at Rockledge Gardens, 2153 U.S. 1

Info:

Chefs led by Dave Morel of Palm Tree on the Grove and Dennis Lott of D.I.G. bistro will be cooking farm-to-table tapas at stations in front of guests. Tickets are \$40, which includes dinner and one drink. Guests may purchase a wine-pairing option for an additional fee. There will be a full cash bar.

Options will be available for vegetarians, vegans, as well as those on a gluten-free diet. Tickets can be purchased by calling 321-633-1702, ext. 238.