

Planters are growth engine for horticulture firm

PlantusNYC's glowing gardens build its presence in the city's high-profile buildings

BY BILL GLOVIN

In a vertical city like Manhattan, unusual spaces are often hidden from view. One such green enclave is the 12th-floor setback of the Architects & Designers Building on East 58th Street, where—once darkness descends—a 3,000-square-foot garden features spewing fountains, a wisteria arbor, a freshwater bog and several cultivars of sedum plants (used in green roofing), all lit by luminescent planters that slowly change color and create a Zen-like, meditative environment.

The planters—called “glowboxes”—were created for Sitaras Fitness by Larry Shepps, founder and principal of PlantusNYC (www.plantusnyc.com) in Irvington, N.Y. Mr. Shepps, whose three-person horticulture-contracting firm's revenues ranged around \$400,000 in 2011, has created and maintained some of New York City's more recog-

nizable spaces: 1 and 2 Penn Plaza, Cushman & Wakefield's global headquarters at 1290 Sixth Ave., the dancing fountain plaza at 59 Maiden Lane, the Maritime Hotel and the Congo Habitat at the Bronx Zoo.

Years of tinkering

Mr. Shepps had been handling lobby flower rotations and landscaping the front of the Vornado Realty Trust building at 150 E. 58th St. when he met 12th-floor tenant John Sitaras, proprietor of Sitaras Fitness, a gym popular among financial and business executives, and personal trainer to Jimmy Johnson of NASCAR fame. Mr. Sitaras gave him the creative freedom to experiment with the first glowboxes, helping him perfect his idea, says Mr. Shepps.

“Before using the glowboxes on projects, I first needed to see how they would survive through the night, then the winter,” said Mr. Shepps. “They did just fine. Now I'm comfortable incorporating them into other projects.” Mr. Shepps has gradually expanded

from contracted services to selling a host of other products, such as wisteria arbors, sedum and a line of imported, Asian-themed statuary.

The glowbox, which neatly fits a ribbon of LED strips under the top of the planter's frame for illumination, has the potential to advertise company URLs or logos on its white porcelain “skin.” Hidden technology changes the planter's skin color at timed intervals.

For Mr. Shepps, the glowbox is the next generation of a patent-pending planter box he developed from a retrofitted drainage pipe five years ago. He has been improving his invention ever since, investing about \$60,000 on research and development. The latest version, which costs about \$875 for a three-foot-long, 16-inch-high planter, is light enough to sit on rooftops and is portable. Thanks to the pipes' ribs and troughs, it is also good at capturing moisture. Mr. Shepps was pleased to discover that annuals that did not survive winter in planters he used previously now revive easily.

Mr. Shepps transformed the planter's skin to create the glowbox about a year ago. His most ambitious structure to date is a 200-foot elongated version that lines the perimeter of a law firm's space on the 17th floor



DAN BRACAGLIA

at 1290 Sixth Ave. To create what he believes is the longest planter in New York City, he cut drainage pipes into seven-foot sections, inserted them into white porcelain boxes, and melded seven-foot sections together on-site. He hopes to market the long planters to existing clients and a West Coast distributor as barriers for security or traffic, or for use as benchlike seating.

Greener buildings

Besides illuminating Manhattan's nightscape year-round, glowboxes help make urban buildings more environmentally friendly, too, according to Mr. Shepps, who received a mas-

ter's degree in horticulture from Clemson University in 1979. He says that using planters and sedum on setbacks and green rooftops can reduce stormwater runoff, a major environmental concern in New York City, especially after Hurricane Sandy, and provide sanctuary for birds and butterflies. That's a plus for buildings that want to obtain Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification points—and a strong selling point, too. ■

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