

Glass Gardens pop-up shop takes root in Norfolk

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Norfolk resident John Wharton has always liked to make things with his hands. He calls himself an entrepreneur and aspired to own a weekend business similar to the farmer's market his father had when Wharton was a child.

Wharton has managed to carry out both goals in one task with Glass Gardens, a pop-up shop that aims to encourage community involvement by way of terrarium- making.



By day, Wharton is the marketing director at Hampton Roads-based American Classic Self Storage.

"I'm in the people business, and I absolutely love it," Wharton said.

But in his free time, Wharton is a plant enthusiast.

"Plants make me happy," Wharton said, as he sorted through a bin of small, colorful plants. "I love the textures, the vivid colors and shapes."

Created by chance, Glass Gardens was built upon Wharton's fondness for these tiny succulents, which are fleshy plants known for their ability to retain water.

"I'm no biologist," he explained, "but I enjoy the challenge of learning about unique plants and keeping them alive."

Almost three years ago, Wharton's wife asked him to bring some of his own terrariums to decorate her jewelry booth at Santa's Stocking Old Fashioned Craft Bazaar at the Kempsville Recreation Center in Virginia Beach.

"I had been potting plants and succulents in tin cans, old milk glasses and tool boxes," he said. "My wife told me to bring a couple to decorate the table with."

Though the plants were there purely for aesthetics, craft fair-goers were interested in purchasing the artfully potted greenery.

"I sold out in no time, and I had people giving me their email addresses for special orders," Wharton said.

What had started as a self-taught, at-home hobby was about to turn into a whole new kind of project.

In April 2013, Wharton participated in Norfolk's Better Block Project in what is now known as the NEON - or the New Energy of Norfolk - District. The first Glass Gardens pop-up shop was in the old Texaco building long before it would become an art venue.

From his involvement in Better Block and Norfolk's growing arts community, Wharton began to find and develop his niche.

"I just wanted to be a part of Norfolk's fabric," Wharton said. "I really enjoy being part of the community that I live and work in."

Most business owners set up shop to turn a profit, but Wharton is different in that respect. Glass Gardens is centered on community engagement and promotes creativity.

After a few successful pop-up shop events, glass gardeners began to ask questions about taking care of the plants and how to create similar terrariums.

With all the inquiries about plant care, Wharton decided to start holding terrarium-making classes to share knowledge of his craft and foster camaraderie within his community. The classes are \$39 and include everything you need to make your own terrarium.

"I wanted to build friendships with my customers," Wharton said, "so it would be much more than just a customer-to-business owner relationship."

Wharton taught one such class May 19 at The Birch, a craft beer bar in West Ghent.

Rows of glass vases and painted pottery lined the sidewalk outside the bar. Bins of cacti and succulents were arranged next to large buckets of fresh soil. A chalkboard held up by a painted pink brick housing a succulent read, "Plants are here!"

Wharton's assistant, Raven Campbell, worked quickly to get the necessities ready, then slung a camera over her shoulder to take pictures.

Wharton eagerly greeted his guests as they arrived to the sold-out class and encouraged them to begin picking out their pots, or "vessels," as he called them.

"There was a time when I was a little afraid of plants," Wharton said, "so mostly, I want to reach those people."

He was overjoyed when an attendee told him that the class would be her first.

After everyone had picked a "vessel" and a handful of succulents, Wharton flashed a wide smile and said, "I think it's going well!"

The next pop-up shop, titled Potted by Glass Gardens and Friends, will take place from Friday through Sunday at 433 Granby St. Wharton will hold terrarium classes each night and will have many already-made creations ready to take home. Wharton also hints that something special will be debuting.

At a time when small businesses and arts culture are flourishing in Norfolk, Wharton's Glass Gardens seem to be growing in the right direction.

