

Profile: Nicholas Marshall, Garden Centre Group chief executive

Author: Alex Lawson – 5th April 2012



The Garden Centre Group's entrepreneurial chief executive believes its sale last week to Terra Firma has positioned it to flourish. Alex Lawson reports.

True vocations are hard to come by but Garden Centre Group chief executive Nicholas Marshall has grabbed his with both hands.

The green-fingered chief executive, who grew up in the Welsh countryside, is a great-great-grandson of Joseph Hooker, a famous botanist and director at Kew Gardens who led the UK's advance into new species of plants and exchanged letters with Charles Darwin on a daily basis.

Marshall's heritage made him the perfect person to head up the garden centre retailer, which was acquired by private equity group Terra Firma for £276m last week.

Marshall is a retailer who understands his product. A stroll around one of his centres will reveal a chief executive who knows exactly what's on the shelf and isn't afraid to, literally, get his hands dirty.

With such a character at the helm and with the company's immediate future secured after the acquisition by the aptly named Terra Firma, the retailer is now well positioned to thrive.

Marshall says the deal has brought to a close "a year of uncertainty" – main lender Lloyds Banking Group put the group up for sale in August.

The boss tells Retail Week he and his team have "turned the business around" and it "is in the right place to do well". Marshall praises Guy Hands, the chairman of new owner Terra Firma, for his "strong handle on the business".

Marshall admits the sale process has been interesting but draining. "Everybody has got you under the microscope and you have to do a lot more explaining about what you are doing and what you will do," he says. "It was a very interesting exercise."

The deal has come just in time, with warmer winter weather bringing on an early spring and "absolutely ideal" conditions for the crucial Easter period when DIY and garden centre retailers rely on a strong performance.

Marshall is a tenacious entrepreneur. He formed Country Gardens in 1984 and believes in leading by example.

"I like to encourage entrepreneurship right through the organisation – from regional managers to the boys and girls on the shopfloor. It empowers people and makes them interested in the business," he says. Marshall has used an e-learning system to train staff and is passionate about getting young people into work.

In 2000, he reluctantly accepted a hostile bid from Wyevale for 40 of his 46 stores. "In retrospect, we should have taken them over," he says.

Marshall continued running the six-store business, then known as Country Homes and Gardens, before merging it back with Wyevale and becoming chief executive of the group in 2008. He refinanced the firm and changed its name to Garden Centre Group in 2009.

The eccentric boss believes he can drive sales by harnessing the emotional connection that customers have with horticultural products and combine it with first-rate customer service. "We have a winning formula," he says. "Passion is an overused word but it's the one thing that binds the horticulture industry together.

"Are the staff in DIY stores passionate about paint? Are shelf fillers in [Tesco](#) working at the dead of night passionate about washing powder? Of course not and who can blame them?"

Marshall has carefully surrounded himself with a team he describes as "the secret to our success" including chief financial officer Antonia Jenkinson who, he says, was "incredible to control the finances of an organisation under so much pressure" during the sale period.

He also praises marketing director Lorrie Robertson, calling her “the guardian of the whole business”, but is modest about his own skills, which seem plentiful. While he is clearly a product man, he also has a firm grip on finances, as a fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants.

So what next? Marshall describes himself as “highly ambitious” and his desire to drive the company forward with online innovation is clear.

“On a Sunday morning I like to get a cup of tea, go back to bed and sit doing the shopping on my iPad,” he reveals. “I can go into so much detail looking at wild flowers and specialist trees.”

He lives in rural Wales and counts two donkeys among his landscape gardeners at home.

Having dug the retailer out of a hole, Marshall will be hoping the grass is greener with Terra Firma’s chequebook out.

Marshall’s record:

- 2012 Garden Centre Group sold to Terra Firma
- 2011 Garden Centre Group up for sale
- 2009 Wyevale renamed to Garden Centre Group
- 2008 Became Wyevale chief executive
- 2007 Bought six centres from Wyevale
- 2000 Sold 40 of its 46 garden centres to Wyevale
- 1984 Formed Country Gardens

Interests “Gardening, gardening and more gardening”