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Wyevale unveils refurbished Percy Thrower garden centre

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Author: John Ryan for Retail Week

Wyevale has unveiled the refurbished and refreshing Percy Thrower garden centre in Shrewsbury that presents the format in full bloom.



Remember Percy Thrower? Possibly not, but people of a certain age might recall the UK's first TV gardening superstar, while others may have seen him digging deep in the Blue Peter garden.

Sadly, Percy laid down his trowel in 1988, but not before opening a garden centre on the outskirts of Shrewsbury.

The garden centre flourished and for some years was owned and managed by the great man's daughters. Latterly it was part of the Garden & Leisure Group, which was itself taken over by Wyevale Garden Centres in 2013.

The name lives on however, and Wyevale has recently completed a store-wide makeover of 'Percy Thrower's A Wyevale Garden Centre', which perhaps demonstrates the durability of the Thrower name.

Indeed, his daughters turned up for the reopening of the centre in March, following an extensive makeover.

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Breaking new ground

But it is likely that anybody visiting Wyevale in Shrewsbury for the first time would have probably noticed one or two things as they swung into the new 250-space car park, before they even enter the store.



The first is a giant spade, just to the right of the shop. If gardening really is your thing, it will impress.

Martin Bitmead, head of store format and design, says that Wyevale believes it to be the world's biggest and has submitted it to Guinness World Records, although its status is still subject to verification. It is certainly big and has something about it of those curiosities found in the US, such as the world's biggest ball of twine.

More importantly, it does act as something of a beacon for the store. "From a promotional point of view, because it [the store] is set back from the road, we wanted people to be able to see it and it works this way. It also represents breaking new ground," says Bitmead.

Putting down roots

Tear your eyes away from the spade and the store front itself surprises. The glass frontage features abstracted green shoots that cling to the exterior, extending from ground level to the roof.

To the left of this, two simple frames that mimic the gable shape of a greenhouse are used to provide exterior homes for the compost collection and bags of the brown stuff are piled up beneath them.



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To add to the view, the site is also being prepared for a Waitrose, which will open in 2016 and sit across the car park from the garden centre.



Budding ideas

Head inside the 60,000 sq ft Percy Thrower store and there is much that will be familiar to garden centre enthusiasts, but quite a lot that isn't.

One of the biggest issues in any retail shed, anywhere, is wayfinding. This is particularly the case with garden centres, which are about dwell-time and adding other elements to a core proposition.

Bitmead, says that the brief given to Dalziel + Pow, which created the blueprint for this store, was to create "something that was fresh and which would be easy to navigate, as well as being enjoyable."



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The outcome, as far as navigation is concerned, is wooden structures that resemble goalposts.

There are a lot of these around the store and perched on the top of each is a single, fairy light-illuminated word. These range from 'cook' to 'grow' and are in place to signify the categories as shoppers stroll along the walkways.

A strong department identity has been given to everything. There are faux-whitewashed brick walls for the 'kids' and 'cook' areas towards the back and carefully contrived mid-shop displays.



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The latter call attention to areas as diverse as 'leisure' (garden furniture) and grass-cutting, where a graphic offers tips on choosing the right mower.

Worth noting too are some of the details that help to create an interior-exterior experience, particularly the terracotta urns that have been turned into mid-shop pendant lightshades.

Nurturing appetites

Bitmead brands The Greenhouse a showstopper. This is a semi-enclosed space with tables and chairs where shoppers can drop in for ideas and advice. It is an interesting area and at specific times during the week it is staffed by former horticultural lecturers, although Bitmead notes that the concept still needs to be finessed.



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Because this is a garden centre, any visit would be incomplete without a cup of coffee and a cake, or perhaps something more substantial.

At the front of the store and just to the left of the cash desks, a metal-framed structure, once more reminiscent of a greenhouse, is home to a cafe called Coffee Ground.

The beans used are roasted in batches in-store, as detailed by a hand-painted graphic on the wall that backs the area.

For those in need of a meal proper, there is the Botanic Kitchen, a more expansive space with terracotta floor tiles at the back of the store.



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Fertile ground

Mention should also be made of the non-Wyevale offer. Bitmead says that the decision was taken to group all of the concessions, spanning from Yankee Candles to a Bonmarché shop-in-shop, in one part of the store in order to make things clearer for shoppers.

There is also 40,000 sq ft of exterior sales area that is located to the right of the shop. This is pretty much a carbon copy standard of what many garden centres do, inasmuch as pots and plants are displayed on a brick surfaced yard, using untreated timber fixtures for the merchandising.

Bitmead says that there is a lot of “inspiration within the store that’s aimed at getting shoppers to browse further”.

He adds that Wyevale’s research shows that most shoppers visiting a garden centre will know roughly what they want, but they are also open to suggestion, hence the heavy stress that has been placed on the visual merchandising.



Another centre is opening in Cardiff in November, which Bitmead says will be a “baby Percy’s”, and that what has been done in Shrewsbury is “a significant step-change” for the retailer.

There is some mileage perhaps to be had from shoppers being asked to dig deep and the giant spade might help in this.

But it is sufficient to say that a visit to Percy Thrower’s A Wyevale Garden Centre is an enjoyable experience, whether you’re green-fingered or not.

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Percy Thrower's A Wyvale Garden Centre:

Size: 100,000 sq ft

Opened: March 2015

Design: Dalziel + Pow

Highlights: "The greenhouse", the wayfinding system and the food and beverage offer

Ambiance: Edge of town without feeling like it. A comfortable place to spend time.

Link: www.retail-week.co.uk