

Exotic plants add a unique quality to landscaping

By Carolyn Devonshire

Business Matters Writer

It was through meditation that a Tallahassee man came up with the idea that changed his business to exotic landscaping plants.

The business is Dream Acres Horticulture Service, Inc.



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On three hidden acres on Queen Anna Drive, Rodney Starling has been importing bamboo from the Orient and

earning a living by providing ground cover. Today's projects require Mr. Starling to use his creative talents for design by

any type of landscaping project."

Like azaleas and impatiens, new bamboo shoots are known for their ability to spread. Mr. Starling has found a strategy to keep the black bamboo plants from spreading, but the key remains a trade secret.

"Invasive bamboo can now be contained by barriers that we use frequently in landscaping projects," he said.

While there are more than 150 varieties of bamboo, Dream Acres deals primarily with the black and the blue varieties because they grow well in the Sunshine State's warm, moist climate. The plants require water at least once every two days and the health of the nursery's plants is among the first thing you notice when you make a trip to Dream Acres.

As Mr. Starling looks to the future, he envisions working with architects on projects throughout the Southeast.

"The business is growing so quickly that I had to hire a bookkeeper," he said. Although Dream Acres is a wholesale nursery, the company designs landscaping projects and places the exotic plants in areas where they have the best chances to flourish.

Nonnative plants are not a rarity in Tallahassee. The Tung Oil trees that bloom in early spring were once imported by a Tallahassee tree farmer. Now they have propagated throughout the woods and subdivisions off Miccosukee Road. Unlike Dream Acres' bamboo plants, however, the Tung Oil trees continue to spread.

Born in Maryland, Mr. Starling moved to Florida as a small child and considers himself to be an "almost native" Floridian. As his business continues to grow rapidly, he turns again to his meditation for guidance on how to meet the growing demand for exotic plants. ■

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Rodney Starling, Dream Acres Horticulture Service

ferns from Australia for the past six years.

"That's how long it takes for the tiny imports to grow full size," Mr. Starling explained. "And now that I have mature plants, my landscaping service has taken off. In fact, I'm getting quite a few calls from people who are just curious about the 'I've been bambruscoed' signs and T-shirts that I designed to promote the business."

Because the Australia tree ferns and autumn red ferns are dormant in the winter and require shade, Mr. Starling pays careful attention to their growth.

"The Australian ferns can grow as high as 20 feet. The red ferns are fully grown at about two feet under optimal conditions," said Mr. Starling, who received his horticulture training at FAMU and the University of Florida. "The bamboo plants, including some varieties that can reach heights of 60 to 100 feet, thrive in sunny locations. Smaller plants, such as the onion bamboo (shaped like an onion) may be better suited for some residential properties, depending on the space and the lighting."

In 2000 Mr. Starling made his first purchase of bamboo and ferns, but he recalls the earlier years when he started

developing landscaping proposals for private and commercial properties in Tallahassee. Now the business is expanding, and Mr. Starling has hired both his son, Zebulon, and a work partner, Cliff Folsom, to help him meet the demanding deadlines.

Neighbors Bob and Patty Liles were so pleased with the landscaping arrangement Mr. Starling designed for their home that Mr. Liles also hired Dream Acres to do the landscaping for his downtown business on Park Street, Sunstate Automobile Dealers Associates.

"Rodney has been maintaining and developing our landscape for many years," said Ms. Liles. "He is always willing to take my suggestions and develop his own plan for creating the perfect look. I have recommended him to family and friends who also use his creative talents to maintain their grounds."

"All of the nurseries in this area are pretty much the same," Mr. Starling claims, "but I deal exclusively with exotic plants. The Australian ferns are difficult to grow because they can attract insects and fungus. Nurturing and caring for the plants requires substantial effort, but once these exotics mature they are ready for