

Anna Johnson hand-picks the plants sold at Little Red Riding Hood Nursery.

Oasis in Lubbock

When Mother Nature turns up the heat, savvy gardeners place Little Red Riding Hood on speed dial. Anna Johnson, who operates the midtown nursery with husband Aric, can tell you how to grow plants you'll love without depleting the water supply or contributing to the dead plant society. By **Karen Lingo**

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ANNA JOHNSON

Hard Dirt and Heat “We have unique soil needs and issues in West Texas,” Anna says. She describes the region’s soil as alkaline, with veins of sand running through it, as well as very hard clay soil. “I tell people that you have to spend \$1 on soil and a penny on the plant. That’s what you need to know if you’re going to garden in this region,” she says.

You also have to know which plants are heat and wind tolerant. “We have extremes, with very hot days and very cold days, and a lot of wind,” Anna says. Plants she loves to use include heucheras and dew plants. “My top seller, along with geraniums, is the sweet potato vine,” she says. “It’s lush and can take an awful lot of abuse.”

Advice From Anna When Anna speaks, gardeners listen. Over the past six years, she has become known for her locally televised series of short programs called *Anna Johnson’s Garden Tips*. “My favorite was one about fungus,” Anna recalls. “It showed me drinking a glass of milk and then turning to say, ‘Got Fungus?’ It was a play on the milk ads and a fun way to provide information about a gardening problem.”

Anna’s expertise comes from experience and from her mother. “My mom, Mary Lee, started the nursery,” Anna says. “She opened a small business across from where we are now and called it the Video and Plant Station. She didn’t know anything about plants, and when she got her first six flats of marigolds she was scared to death that no one would buy them.”

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Budding Gardeners

In the summer, the nursery offers a program for pre-schoolers called Blossom in the Garden. “We have a tutor who works with the children, and she makes the program very interactive,” Anna says. “At the end, we’ll do a ladybug release. Kids love bugs, and we point out that ladybugs are good for the garden.”



TOP: A riot of color greets shoppers at Little Red Riding Hood Nursery during spring and summer months. **ABOVE:** Anna and her mother, Mary Lee, use vacation time to see what other garden centers are doing, and to look for new plants. **RIGHT:** Every display in the nursery invites you to take something home. “Outdoor entertaining has been a growing trend for us,” Anna says.



Fairy Tale Beginning

As Mary phased out videos in the shop, she needed another name for the business. “A large Wolfe Nursery sat on this spot,” Anna says. “Compared to it, we were really small, so my brother jokingly said that we should call ourselves Little Red Riding Hood because of the big wolf across the street.”

When the other nursery went out of business, Mary bought the larger space and began expanding. “We now encompass about a city block,” Anna says.

Anna and Aric took over the business four years ago. “Mom wanted to move out of midtown, where she could have more space,” Anna says. “At her new place, she has greenhouses, and my brother Mark Lee manages it.”

Nursery Specials Some of the things that set Little Red Riding Hood Nursery apart from other centers include free gardening seminars and a fabulous selection of containers from China, England, and Italy. The handpicked plants also make a difference.

“When I visit a grower, I select only the healthiest-looking plants to bring back,” Anna says. “I also plant-hunt. Our vacations revolve around garden centers to see what others are doing and to find new plants. On our last trip I found ‘Cinnamon’ anagallis, a ground cover with a pale pink flower that’s as precious as it can be.”

Anna and Aric dedicated a whole refrigerated room to keeping bulbs in prime condition. Herbs fill another area. “We carry 150 different varieties of herbs,” Anna says.

In spring and summer, walking through the nursery resembles a stroll through a rainbow. Vibrant colors tempt you at every turn. The place has come a long way since the day Anna’s mother worried about selling those first six flats of marigolds. ●