

reprinted from

# greater charlotte**biz**

pursuing a balance of business and life

[www.greatercharlottebiz.com](http://www.greatercharlottebiz.com)

*There's No Business*  
**LIKE SHOW  
BUSINESS**

Southern Shows Celebrates  
50 Years of Success

(l to r)  
David J. Zimmerman  
President  
Joan Zimmerman  
Chief Operating Officer and  
Co-founder  
Robert E. Zimmerman  
Chairman and Co-founder  
Southern Shows, Inc.

*There's No Business*  
**LIKE SHOW  
BUSINESS**



**Southern Shows Celebrates  
50 Years of Success**

**W**hen visitors enter the Southern Spring Home & Garden Show every March, they step into a magic world. The 240,000 square feet of exhibition space at The Park is filled with flowers, gardens and exhibits that evoke the spirit of springtime.

Over two dozen meticulously landscaped gardens and 400 exhibits provide visitors with entertainment and inspiration. It is an interactive world where consumers meet sellers and experts mingle with amateurs and everyone gets in the mood to usher in spring. And, that's just the way the Southern Shows, Inc. has been doing it for 50 years.

"We purposefully hold the show in March every year, a month before the calendar says it's actually spring, so guests can enjoy their first taste of springtime at our show," says Joan Zimmerman, who created Southern Shows in 1959.

**Show Business**

At the time, Joan Zimmerman was working for Greensboro public relations agency executive John Harden. Dr. Sid Dorton, who ran the N.C. State Fair at the time and for whom Dorton Arena in Raleigh is named, came into the office one day complaining about having to travel to New York to attend a garden show. Joan immediately recognized the value of creating a North Carolina show and Harden offered her his support.

Joan also recognized there was one person whose sales and people skills could make such an event truly successful, and that was her husband, Robert, who, at the time, was running his family's electric fence business.



The Southern Spring Home & Garden Show is 240,000 square feet of exhibition space at The Park filled with flowers, gardens and exhibits evoking the spirit of springtime.

Robert immediately signed on, selling the exhibit spaces, meeting with the nurserymen, attending every garden club meeting in three states, and was the visionary for the look and feel of the fledgling Southeastern Flower and Garden Show, held in the Dorton Arena, while Joan organized both the show and the public relations effort to attract the public.

The Zimmermans teamed up with Raleigh landscape artist Richard Bell, who designed the show, utilizing ideas that were innovative for the time, such as rooftop, patio and container gardens.

"All of us were young," says Joan. "We had nothing to lose and didn't recognize the potential pitfalls."

It took nine months to organize that first show and, while it didn't make money, it was an aesthetic success. Through the 1960s the Zimmermans kept their day jobs, while organizing exhibitions on the side.

The company moved to Charlotte in 1962 when the 80,000-square-foot Charlotte Merchandise Mart opened. In 1967 they bought out John Harden's interest in Southern Shows. That was also the year they opened the Southern Christmas Show in Charlotte, followed by the Southern Farm Show in Raleigh in 1968, the Southern Women's Show in 1982, and the Southern Ideal Home Show in 1985.

Today, with the Zimmermans' son David now serving as president, Southern Shows has become one of the most prestigious consumer show producers in the nation. It owns and produces 19 separate shows annually in 11 different markets throughout the South and Midwest. The combined shows attract approximately 10,000 exhibitors and more than 600,000 attendees every year.

---

**"When you stand at the front of the show and watch the crowds coming in, you think this is phenomenal. To stand there and see all those people coming to enjoy something you created."**



~ Joan Zimmerman  
Chief Operating Officer

---

### Time to Celebrate

This year Southern Shows marks its 50th anniversary. Appropriately, the theme for this month's Southern Home & Garden Show is "Celebrate!" Although the spring show has changed its name several times since that first exhibition in Raleigh, it remains the bedrock show for the company, focusing on the latest and best in home improvement and gardening.

About 12,000 people attended the first show in 1961 over its four-day run. Tickets cost \$3. Exhibitors paid \$250 to display their wares. This year exhibition space runs about \$900 for a 10-foot square area, while guests will pay \$10 at the door. The 2010 show, which runs for five days, is expected to attract 60,000 visitors.

During the past 50 years, Southern Shows has grown almost as quickly as its oldest show. In 1967, it opened the Southern Christmas Show, creating an enchanted land for holiday

revelers, with Olde Towne Shops filled with decorations, wines, gifts and crafts, as well as plenty of seasonal entertainment. The Christmas Show has become a tradition for many local families and visitors. It has grown from a three-day event to a 12-day affair that each year attracts over 100,000 people and over 600 exhibitors, making it the largest event on Southern Shows' calendar.

In 1968, Southern Shows produced the first Southern Farm Show at the N.C. Fairgrounds in Raleigh. Now the largest agricultural exposition in the Carolinas and Virginia, the show features over 300 exhibitors representing 500 manufacturers.

In 1982, the company created the first women's show in Charlotte where women can shop, watch fashion shows, attend cooking demonstrations, sample gourmet foods, treat themselves to makeovers, and meet celebrity guests. The idea caught on quickly and Southern Shows now produces women's shows in ten different cities, from Florida to Michigan.

In 1985, the company added six home and garden shows, held in Raleigh, Charlotte, and Greensboro, to the schedule.

### Testimony to Success

While the shows provide plenty of entertainment and require what David Zimmerman calls "a city of builders" to produce, they are not theater, but commerce. Although the public comes to the shows for a variety of reasons, exhibitors are there primarily to market their products.

"It goes back to the concept of the ancient bazaar," explains Joan Zimmerman. "We bring buyers and sellers together in a fun exciting ►

atmosphere. It's a wonderful opportunity to test market a product to thousands of people."

Max Appel, who spent years promoting the virtues of his Orange Glo products at home and garden trade shows, agrees.

"There is nothing like it for hearing what the customer wants," says Appel. "It's the best focus group in the world."

Appel, a consultant to environmental and medical organizations, developed Orange Glo Wood Cleaner and Polish, a cleanser made from the oil of Valencia oranges, in his garage. In 1986, he began exhibiting the sweet smelling product at the Southern Spring Home & Garden Show and for a long time consumer shows were his only form of distribution. In 1992, he introduced Orange Glo's second product, Orange Clean Multi-Purpose Cleaner. Next came OxiClean, a laundry detergent.

"When I was first starting out, I came to Charlotte with Orange Glo," says Appel. "The Southern Spring Garden Show was just great. Huge crowds, good buyers."

After Appel teamed up with legendary pitchman Billy Mays, a 1997 deal with Home Shopping Network catapulted Orange Glo's sales to a reported \$100 million in just a few years. Appel sold Orange Glo in 2006. Appel says Southern Shows was instrumental in building his company's reputation.

"Southern Shows is the Apple Corporation of consumer shows," asserts Appel. "There is nothing like it for its variety, its people and its general professionalism. Joan Zimmerman

---

## Southern Shows owns and produces 19 separate shows annually in 11 different markets throughout the South and Midwest; the combined shows attract approximately 10,000 exhibitors and more than 600,000 attendees every year.

---



created it from scratch. She's extremely focused and exacting. She is absolutely great."

Today, Appel has a new company, which produces homeopathic creams and lotions. His first product after selling Orange Glo was Aaah Toilet Paper Foam. Now he is marketing OxiNeem, made from the Neem tree in India, and back on the consumer show circuit.

### On With the Show

Home shows consistently attract a large, quality audience, eager to learn about the latest products and services for their homes.

"We bring people that personal connection," says David Zimmerman. "People can see a product, pick it up, and touch it. They can talk with someone about it."

Approximately 90 percent of the exhibitors at Southern Shows are small business owners, says Zimmerman. The Southern Shows staff provides training classes before the show, offering help in exhibit design and tips on how to be most effective.

David Winters is a case in point. He started his business, the Charlotte franchise of Screenmobile the nation's largest mobile screening company, at a difficult economic time. He was told that the Southern Shows would be a great marketing tool, but he worried about the initial investment in booth space as well as the development of the booth itself. Those worries are long gone.

"The last two shows alone have generated approximately 35 percent of my total sales for the year," Winters wrote Zimmerman in August 2009. "Nothing else has come close to being this effective...Even in these tough economic times it produced so much work we could barely keep up."

As well as helping to promote small business, the Zimmermans have used their home shows to support local artists. In the early '70s they saw Max Howard's sculptures at a Charlotte arts festival and invited him to participate in the Southern Spring Home & Garden Show. Howard, a former welder in the fabrication industry, creates sculptures using brass, copper and titanium and his outdoor wall pieces, fountains and planters provide accents for many homes in the Carolinas.

"I really got my start at the Spring Home &

Garden Show," says Howard. "My work was well received and it gave me the push I needed to try sculpture full-time."

While working for other landscape companies, Kevin James attended three Southern Spring Home & Garden Shows. He could never understand why his bosses would set up their garden displays, leave the exhibition, and then return to dismantle the exhibition.

"It seemed like a lot of money to spend for the two or three calls that would come out of it," James comments. "When I started my own company, I decided to stay at the garden for as much of the show as I possibly could."


James has attended the show for the last 12 years and has been delighted with the results. Every day of the show, he talks with 50 to 60 people, generating a year's worth of work from the five-day show.

"I talked with one woman about a bird feeder and that led to a \$30,000 landscaping job," James reports. "People call and say they saw us at the show four or five or six years ago, and now that they are ready to build their dream house, they want us to design the landscaping. It's all about making connections."

While Joan and Robert Zimmerman continue to participate in the management of Southern Shows, David Zimmerman now runs the company. During a difficult market, he has managed to increase attendance and exhibitor bases at all the shows. He continues to apply the skills he learned from his parents—innovative thinking, persistence and service, but he gives a lot of credit to his staff.

"We find good people and hang on to them," he says. "Forty percent of our staff has been with us for 10 or more years. My job is to just keep them on the highway."


As to what motivates the Zimmermans to continue to produce shows after 50 years, Joan sums it up best.

"When you stand at the front of the show and watch the crowds coming in, you think this is phenomenal," she says. "To stand there and see all those people coming to enjoy something you created." 

---

*This article was reprinted in whole or in part from Greater Charlotte Biz and may not be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher. ©2010 Galles Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved.*

### Southern Shows, Inc.

810 Baxter Street   
Charlotte, N.C. 28202

Phone: 704-362-6594

**Principals:** Robert E. Zimmerman, Chairman and Co-founder, Joan Zimmerman, CEO and Co-founder; David J. Zimmerman, President

**Founded:** 1959

**Employees:** 35

**Business:** Produces 19 consumer shows each year in 11 markets, ranging from Florida to Michigan. Shows include the Southern Christmas Show, the Women's Show Series, the Southern Farm Show, the Southern Spring Home & Garden Show and the Southern Ideal Home Show series; BBB Accredited Business with a rating of A+.

[www.southernshows.com](http://www.southernshows.com)

