

Business includes room for vegetable garden, birds

Container storage business leaves no mark

By Sandra Thomas
Staff writer

WHEN MARKETING consultant Tami Reilly was asked to manage a new self-storage business in Marpole last year, she agreed. But the Vancouver resident also wanted to make the company as sustainable and environmentally friendly as possible.

One year later, as the business marks its first anniversary, the result is an unconventional storage facility that includes outdoor vegetable gardens, room for birds and an office complete with dual-flush toilets, double-glazed windows, bamboo plywood and radiant-heated floors.

"The customers love it," said Reilly, manager of Vancouver Self Storage, at 8700 Barnard St. "It shows that you can do something good for business, but at the same time do something good for the environment."

Reilly, who had no experience with sustainable projects, researched the best methods and materials to use while expanding the business. She said company owner Ralph McLean started his business



Tami Reilly manages the eco-friendly Vancouver Self Storage in Marpole.

photo Dan Toulgoet

with several shipping containers on a piece of property. McLean consulted with Reilly on the viability of creating a storage company on the property and he asked her to give it a go. Reilly said everything fell into place because initially, as the demand grew, the company simply added more containers.

"We slowly added containers, and we didn't have to build anything," said Reilly. "Because there's no construction there's zero impact

on the environmental footprint of the property. If the land is ever reclaimed, all you'd have to do is move the containers."

Once the business took off, Reilly took the idea of sustainability one step further. While most storage businesses are based on concrete, the Marpole business dug trenches under each container to catch surface water. That allows water to drain into the ground to reduce the volume of surface

drainage entering the city's storm system. Reilly said an unexpected bonus of that decision came when birds began using the space under the containers for shelter.

The office was created from two shipping containers pieced together. The doors of the containers were removed and recycled, and a window wall was constructed with double-glazed windows. The builders took advantage of the available southern exposure and, Reilly said, on most days there's no need to turn on lights in the office.

She added the hardest sell to the owner was the use of environmentally friendly bamboo for cupboards inside the office. The cost was four times that of standard plywood. The carpenter wasn't sure how to cut it, and the painter wasn't sure it would hold varnish. But the result exceeded Reilly's expectations. Instead of buying a countertop, scrap bamboo was used. A skylight was added to the back of the container, above a work area, to provide additional light.

A small portion of the property was turned into a garden, which Reilly hopes will one day produce enough vegetables to donate to a

food program. Coffee grounds and raw food scraps from the office are composted on site and will be used on the garden. Part of the yard was "paved" using recycled asphalt millings. These provide a hard surface and dust control, but are also permeable to surface water and can absorb rainfall.

McLean, a structural engineer with a background in construction and consulting, said when Reilly first approached him with her ideas he was skeptical.

"At first, being an old construction guy, I just thought it would cost more and cause delays," he said. "But once we got started and I looked at her ideas they made sense. Tami was terrific and took things a step further."

McLean notes many storage facilities are built as single-use giant boxes that offer little scope for other uses. They're typically torn down once the business closes.

"But what we've done is completely recyclable," he said. "When there's no longer a need for storage all of these units can be used. They can be put back on a ship, or used for offices on construction sites, or for cabins or storage."

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