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Business Spotlight: Sunbelt Living in the Ozarks

Garnet & Co. builds outdoor lifestyle environments

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Contributing Writer

When Ben Hunt moved to Rogersville from Phoenix, Ariz., in 2007, there weren't many companies building all-inclusive outdoor living spaces.

"I decided the market was right and the competition was right to get into the dirt and start building these spaces," says Hunt, who with his wife, Amy, owns **Garnet & Co.** "People thought I was crazy to come into the economy and try to make a living building outdoor spaces."



Ben Hunt, co-owner of Garnet & Co., a builder of outdoor living spaces, says he had \$250,000 worth of projects slated for 2011 before the year began.

Garnet & Co. creates outdoor lifestyle environments from designing the plans to laying pavers on the patios, building the wooden decks and pergolas, and planting the flowers and shrubs.

Hunt's move paid off in a big way as **Garnet's** revenues rose from \$80,000 in 2008 to \$780,000 in 2009. Revenues settled at \$450,000 in 2010 – due to an extraordinarily large project in 2009 – but Hunt says he expects to exceed \$600,000 in 2011. "Before the year even started, we had \$250,000 worth of projects lined up," he notes.

Scrap the consulting

Hunt founded **Garnet** 10 years ago in Phoenix. He built a combination of more than 700 outdoor kitchens and fireplaces throughout the country, including in Florida, California, Texas and Kansas. But the core of the business was traveling the country as a contractor for Outdoor Living Products, consulting on outdoor kitchen and fireplace jobs.

Hunt has a degree in marketing from Bellevue University in Nebraska, giving him a keen eye, he says, for marketing opportunities. It was on one of those consulting trips that he realized contractors in the Springfield area weren't taking full advantage of the outdoor living trend. "I found Springfield to be one of the toughest places to get through to contractors," Hunt says. "I had good firsthand experience in what they did and didn't do, and what they didn't do was build total outdoor environments."

Hunt also saw the real estate bubble about to burst in Phoenix, one of the first and hardest-hit cities. He not only sold his house before the crash, but he also predicted that more people would be investing in their existing homes. "Outdoor living spaces have been a big trend in the Sunbelt for at least 15 years, and I knew it was becoming more of a national trend," Hunt says.

Now, **Garnet** is more than an outdoor kitchen and fireplace contractor. About 90 percent of Hunt's jobs also include other products and services such as pergolas, decks and landscaping.

Scott Russell, a homeowner in the Tan Oak subdivision in east Springfield, says of the three companies he interviewed in 2009 to build his patio and outdoor fireplace and do some landscaping, **Garnet** was the only company that would provide him with a design and perform all aspects of the job. "That was a big advantage because we needed a combination of landscaping and structural landscaping," Russell says.

Sondra Smith, an interior designer and owner of Heritage House Designs in Nixa, has referred several of her clients to Hunt to design the exterior of their homes. One of Smith's referrals, a project on Farm Road 219 in

Rogersville, turned into **Garnet's** largest project.

That project included a large outdoor living space, complete with a sunken hot tub and cast stone pavers on the house to match those with the landscaping. The \$380,000 project took six months to complete in 2009.

"Before, I couldn't find anyone who worked with the pavers, masonry, wood and all of it," Smith says. "And if I have an issue, I don't have to track him down, I call and he's there."

Starts with drawings

Hunt typically meets with prospects to determine what they are looking for and has his landscape designer draw up plans based on the customer's desires. "It's all pen and ink, at an old-school design table. There are no computer plans," Hunt says. "My motto is that if we're doing it the hard way, we're doing it the right way." Hunt says the plans also allow homeowners to have cohesive drawings of the finished product, even if they cannot finish the project in one year, or even if he isn't hired to complete the remainder of the project later.



Homeowner Scott Russell says he interviewed three outdoor companies before selecting Garnet & Co.

Garnet & Co.

Owners: Ben and Amy Hunt

Founded: 2001

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Products/services: Outdoor residential living environments

2010 Revenue: \$450,000

Employees:

Hunt says **Garnet & Co.**'s outdoor living spaces start at \$10,000 and average \$30,000 to \$50,000. He is currently working on a \$200,000 project on Farm Road 199 in Springfield building a full outdoor living space, which included moving the roof of the house to cover the new patio.

Hunt handles 80 percent of the work in-house, but he hires subcontractors during busy times. Hunt says his company always performs the technical aspects such as leveling the surfaces.

"He tells me what he wants and I handle the labor, but he does the hard work, dealing with the homeowner and designing the project," says subcontractor Javier Romero, owner of Quality Masonry in Springfield. "He has a unique style and doesn't do just one type of outdoor space, but designs all of them custom."

Since moving to the Ozarks, Hunt has averaged 10 projects a year, ranging in length from three months to six months. About half of his clients have come from the Home Builders Association of Greater Springfield show each year. "That is a very important weekend for us," says Hunt, noting other business comes from referrals.