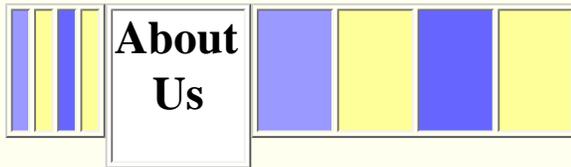


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In 1938 William DiPaola opened his first business, a fruit stand, in the Farmer's Outlet in Flushing, Queens." I still remember the address," Chris, the youngest of two sons, smiles, "193-08 Northern Blvd. I started helping out there in 1940, when I was six." William sold his stand in 1950 when he needed to have surgery done on his hernia. He then went to work up the street for a childhood friend at Boulevard Nursery, a garden center, until 1957. After leaving Boulevard Nursery William moved his family to Plainview, Long Island, and opened up Belleclare Nursery. He started this business with the help of his two sons Bill and Chris.

Chris known fondly as the "Fig Man" to Belleclare Nursery's customers, sits at our kitchen table, leans back in his chair, eyes distant, shaking his head as he remembers the winter of 1960. "It was one of the severest winters. The coldest winter without any snow. That's what started it." Back in those days the nursery kept their fig trees in the traditional way, planted in the ground. Which is all fine and good until the first frost comes around. Once that cold weather hits, the trees have to be wrapped in layers of black plastic to protect them from the light and the wind until spring. But that year no amount of wrapping could protect the precious fig trees in Nursery's back yard. Come springtime Chris hung his head distraught. The annual unwrapping

There is one tree in amongst the 2,500 that stands alone and is never to be sold. It is the thirty-three-year old tree from Formia, Italy that belonged to William DiPaola. It is this tree according Catherine DiPaola, Chris's wife, that is the underlying reason why growing and caring for these trees became so important. "I don't really remember figs being mentioned really until after Pop died, when Chris started taking care of Pop's tree." She pauses, "Yea, that's about when he became interested and started all the propagating and stuff." It was both the combination of Mr. Oddo's advice and his new fig horticulture fascination that led to Belleclare Nursery's first fifteen minutes of fame in the summer of 1992. In May of that year as the story goes, Anne Raver, New York Times Garden Section editor, and John Amoruso, County Agent Of Ithaca New York were at a seminar. Mr. Amoruso had asked Ms. Raver what fruit her spring/summer feature article would be about. She said figs. Mr. Amoruso had told her of how he had written a query in a magazine about growing figs. He said that Chris had responded with an informative twelve-page letter, and if she needed information she should interview my father. The article appeared that June in the *New York Times*, and as Ms. Raver says, "It's the most successful article I've written concerning fruits.

"There was a long duration of notoriety from that article. The New York Times reran the article four

Two more articles were written about the store. One by a freelance writer named Fred Barlow published in a Chicago magazine, and the other for the September 1997 issue of *Martha Stewart Living*. The latter article resulted in Martha and her crew taping an episode of her show at the Nursery. Chris smiling fondly at the memory beamed, "It blew the lid off the pot, again. There's just no ending." He can say that again. Two different movies were filmed on location at the nursery amongst the trees. Then in 1999 Martha came back. She taped a segment with Bill's wife, Erna. Together Erna and Martha baked a fig cake. This segment was added to the end of the 1997 episode, and was repeated forty-one times from the first of that September to present. This past September yet another "fifteen minutes" was bestowed upon Belleclare when Sylvia Carter, who writes a food column for *Newsday*, stopped by for an interview. Chris is still amazed. "Mind boggling." He says. I think Belleclare Nursery's success today has surpassed anything that my father had dreamed of.

Last summer Belleclare opened the summer season with 2,500 trees. There are eighty-five different varieties specializing in international as well as domestic varieties: Italian, Greek, Croatian, Spanish, and French just to name a few. Customers who return back from time spent abroad bring fresh cuttings to grow. Chris is recognized as an authority on fig culture. He packages and sells his own special blend fig tree potting soil and makes house calls



of the trees revealed that there wouldn't be much of a fruitful crop that year. The top growth on the trees had been almost totally destroyed leaving only the root systems and part of the trunks left.

years in a row and has been referenced in other magazines and periodicals. This led to what Chris calls his "second and third fifteen minutes of fame"

"Mr. Oddo, a little old Italian man, a friend of your Pop-Pop's, I used to call Cheech," he laughed, "just stood there leaning on his cane smoking his Cheroot [an Italian cigar] watching me and my dissatisfaction and disgust as I struggled to prune off all the dead wood. He said to me in Italian, 'you know there is a better way of growing figs; take them up out of the ground. Grow them in containers. You water more and fertilize more, but you eat more figs. Take them into a cold dark garage out of the wind and water once a month. When you take them out in the springtime they'll be alive from bottom to top."



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