



Cheers!

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suburban life

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DEEPLY ROOTED

As CEO of **PLANT Design Group** and executive director of **Hortulus Farm Garden and Nursery**, Jon Kontz uses the restorative power of nature to uplift clients and communities.

by **BILL DONAHUE**

Jon Kontz completed his first landscape-design job as a nine-year-old boy in Jermyn, the small northeastern Pennsylvania town where he came of age. Although the client wound up stiffing Kontz when it came time to compensate him for a job well done, the opportunity was a first step in a mission to make a positive, lasting difference in the world by creating incredible spaces.

In the years since that first landscaping job, Kontz has designed from Philadelphia to Los Angeles, and from China to Nigeria. Today, as the founder of PLANT Design Group, he leads a design-build firm devoted to reshaping properties in Bucks County and surrounding areas. The firm is driven by Kontz's belief that well-designed physical spaces can contribute the natural beauty and rest humans need to be at their best in all facets of life.

PLANT Design Group specializes in transforming everyday outdoor spaces into opportunities for inspired living. Some clients hire the firm to orchestrate complex multi-trade projects to solve specific problems. Others want to add value to their properties apart from their enjoyment of their spaces, such as supporting pollinators, planting native species, and protecting local waterways. Whether a project involves a newly designed garden, a stone patio by the pool, or an outdoor dining area to facilitate gatherings with friends and family, the firm enables clients to "create memories by transforming spaces."

Kontz has the heart of a poet and the mind of an entrepreneur. He has built and led numerous mission-driven enterprises throughout his career, in industries ranging from technology to architectural design. In addition, he serves as an angel investor and advisor to mission-driven start-up companies in need of guidance, capital, and other vital resources.

"If there's a common thread in everything I've done," he says, "it's the desire to leave the world better than I found it."

Hortulus Farm Garden and Nursery is perhaps the most tangible example of his mission. Kontz and his family—Ariel, his wife, and their

three young children—assumed stewardship of Hortulus in 2021. Nestled into the rolling hills of Wrightstown, right on the edge of Newtown, Hortulus features a combination of cultivated gardens and wild spaces, and is a member of the Garden Conservancy.

The gardens, which have been referred to as "one of Pennsylvania's secret treasures," were previously cultivated by the duo of Renny Reynolds, a renowned garden and entertainment planner, and Jack Staub, a prominent garden writer and playwright. Kontz and his family are now in the process of re-creating the property as an upscale family-friendly destination farm.

Tranquil and inspiring public places like Hortulus are becoming increasingly rare. Thankfully, the nonprofit status of the Hortulus Farm Foundation ensures that the historic property will continue to exist in perpetuity.

The sprawling grounds include an on-site nursery and retail experience, but Kontz emphasizes that Hortulus is less interested in "selling stuff" than it is in creating connections and memorable experiences. Besides providing opportunities to bask in natural beauty, Hortulus hosts events and markets through which visitors can interact with local artists, artisans, and other creators. Last year, for example, Hortulus hosted an array of weekend events, such as a European Christmas market, a harvest festival, a wildflower festival, and a peony festival, among others.

Kontz and his team are busily preparing the grounds for the upcoming season. While he does not yet have a formal opening date, he suggests following Hortulus on Instagram (@hortulus.farm) for news and updates. He is excited to welcome guests to enjoy new aspects of the hospitality experience such as a woodland walk and a botanical children's garden.

"We've spent the past year decluttering and removing invasives from the property," he says. "The woods are cool in the heat of the summer, and they're much different through the end of the summer

Kontz photo by Jody Robinson; others courtesy of Hortulus/PLANT Design Group



Scenes from the 2023 season at Hortulus



and fall. Experiencing our woodland walk is like having a good glass of wine; wine is always changing, so you're going to have a completely unique experience each time you return to it."

Considering the benefits it can provide, a woodland walk aligns perfectly with Kontz's goal of providing experiences rooted in natural beauty and personal rejuvenation.

"The woodland walk creates a physical reaction in our guests," he adds. "Trees utilize the red and blue light spectrums, which they use to grow, the same blue light that stimulates parts of the brain. Since the tree leaves consume the blue light and the carbon dioxide, the remaining spectrum of green light, coupled with an increase in oxygen, makes you feel different as you experience our woodland walk. We've created a space where guests can experience that, and that seems to be kind of rare these days. It's more curated than a park, but not as programmed as Longwood [Gardens]."

By Kontz's count, approximately 70,000 guests visited Hortulus last year. Some were drawn to specific events, while others came to cut flowers, see the lambs on site, have a coffee or a cocktail, or simply wander the grounds. No matter what kinds of events or programming Hortulus lines up for the upcoming season, guests can expect a visit they won't soon forget.

"I hope Hortulus inspires people to create their own spaces," Kontz adds. "Hortulus in Greek means small garden. This isn't a small garden, but I think hospitality is one of the most precious gifts you can give the world. It is what we hope to continue creating at Hortulus Farm, and what we hope to inspire.

"I just want people to know we're here and we're putting our heart and soul out there for them to enjoy," he continues. "Whatever we do [for the upcoming season], I just want it to be good for the community, good for nature, and good for the people who are sup-

porting it. That's my core passion. As long as what we're doing is putting something good out into the world, I'll be happy." ■



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Follow Hortulus Farm Garden and Nursery on Instagram (@hortulus.farm) for details about the upcoming season.