

SYDNEY'S RENT-A-TREE

Every year, seasonal climate extremes slowed business for Sydney's plant and tree nursery. One cold January morning, a large black Cadillac came down the lane to his nursery, and a distinguished-looking gentleman exited from the passenger-side back seat. Normally, Sydney, his wife, or his daughter would have immediately gone out to welcome any approaching customer. Today, it caught Sydney a little off guard as 20 degrees and falling snow rarely produced visitors wanting to stroll the gardens. The gentleman carefully walked across the snow and entered the nursery office.

"Welcome, sir," said Sydney. "What can I do for you, today?"

"Well, sir," said the gentleman. "My wife is bored with all this snow and ice, and she wants to have a party. Perhaps, you may think this an odd question, but do you ever rent trees and shrubs?"

"Rent trees and shrubs?" questioned Sydney. "No, I ... uh ... I've never done that."

“I’m in a bit of a pickle, you see,” said the gentleman. “I told my wife I was sure I could find someone to do it.”

“Well ... I ... uh ... I suppose I could work something out,” said Sydney, while thinking to himself how he could possibly manage something like that. “Did you have anything particular in mind?”

“Tropical. It must be tropical.”

“Tropical,” repeated Sydney. Looking out the frosted office window, he continued, “It’s the middle of winter and you want something tropical?”

“That would be the ticket, old chap,” answered the gentleman.

Sydney managed to grow a few tropical plants to satisfy a small demand during the spring and summer, but those were all gone. Still, he did have some bananas and citrus trees in pots that he moved into the greenhouse during the winter.

“Well ... I do have a few things in the greenhouse that are tropical, but I couldn’t put them outside in these temperatures.”

“Oh, everything would be inside,” said the gentleman. “Everything would be inside.”

“The thing is,” said Sydney. “I’ve never done anything like this before, so I don’t have any idea how much to charge.”

“Oh, money is no object,” said the gentleman. “You just do the job, and you will be handsomely paid.”

“Okay, I guess we’re going to have a party. A tropical party. First, I need to get your name, address, phone number, when you want to have this party and so on.”

“Right. It’s George Matheson, 1712 Shafer’s Glen Road, Colin Ridge.”

As Sydney wrote everything down, he realized there were only two places on Shafer’s Glen Road that he knew of. And both were very, very big estates. The next day he visited Mr. Matheson’s estate and got a feel for the party room. The following day, he took inventory of what he had and then called several of his friends who he knew to have some tropical plants in their greenhouses.

Two weeks later, the Matheson’s had a party with the thermostat set at 90 degrees and a room full of people wearing leis and flowery shirts. The weather outside hung at 22 degrees and the snow fell in light flurries.

Well paid, indeed. With the job complete, Sydney had a chance to reflect on the project. It all just seemed to fall into place as a nice supplement to his nursery business. With the weather, machinery, pests, diseases, and a host of other issues, Sydney had developed a strong sense of improvisation. He felt he had taken that to a whole other level with the Matheson's party. As unusual as that first endeavor was, there arose many others over the years that rivaled it. After a while, Sydney stopped questioning why folks did what they did. 'Go with the flow' became one of his favorite sayings with each new job.

Another one of his more interesting jobs also came in the dead of winter. Acorn Productions hired Sydney to help with a movie set. The movie director and producer wanted a particular scene shot in snowy and icy weather, which matched conditions at the time. To complicate things, though, they wanted the same scene shot in spring, summer, and fall, and they didn't have time to wait. Fortunately, this job came after Sydney had gained several years of experience and built up an extensive contact list across the country. He didn't have too much trouble locating plants and trees in a state that would match the scene in different seasons.

Trucking costs were enormous, but the movie producer had a very generous budget. As a bonus, Sydney got to keep the material and plant it in his nursery to sell the next year.

The one item that presented a little more of a challenge was the dormant brown Bermudagrass growing on the set. They tried dying a small plot green, but the director didn't like the look. Sydney found a Bermudagrass grower in South Florida who still had green grass, so he ordered ten pallets of green Bermudagrass. They had to ship it in a climate-controlled van, so it didn't brown too quickly when entering the colder temperatures of the area. The movie company provided a crew of about fifty men to clear the snow and install the green grass on top of the brown. Working quickly, they got all the scenes shot in a day. When they finished shooting, they picked up the new grass and hauled it to the landfill. Sydney, being a plant lover, kind of hated to see all that grass go to waste, but he did his job and got well paid for it.

With all the well-paying jobs over the years, none gave Sydney more satisfaction than the Christmas party thrown at the orphans' home in Wabash. A particularly bleak winter had cast a barren chill over the area. Sydney's Rent-A-Tree

created a room filled with Christmas flowers and lots of holly in full berry. They had Christmas trees for all the orphans, and they decorated them with the kids' favorite items. Supposedly, Santa Claus came down special, too. Some claim that Santa looked an awful lot like Sydney.

Were you to see Sydney on your travels through life, I'm sure he would tell you to "go with the flow", learn how to improvise, and always keep an open heart and mind for that next opportunity, no matter how unusual it might seem at first.