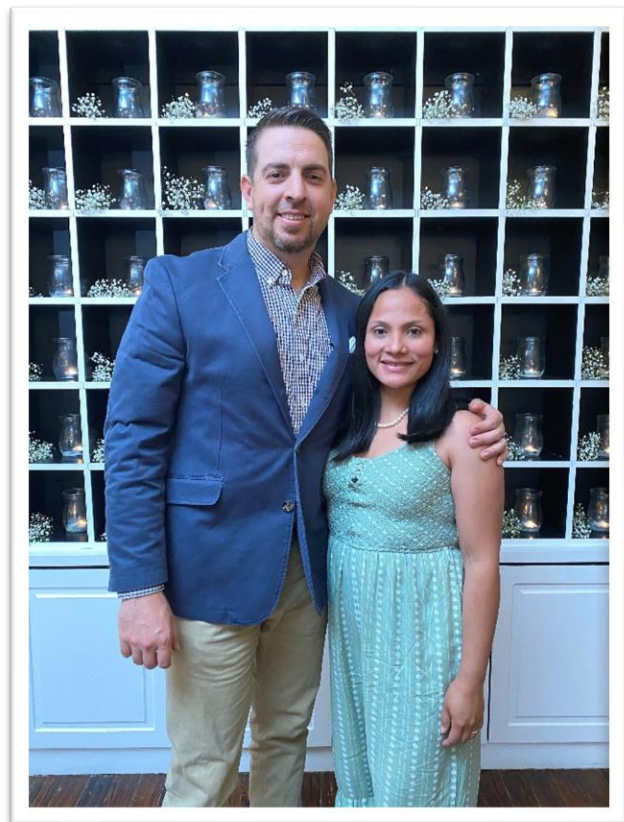


Note: C12 is about community, and that is why we meet in our groups. However, there is a broader community of C12 members throughout North Texas. Look for a series of introductions that you can use to get to know others that share the bonds of C12. – Tom Hawes, Joe Galindo, Mike Gullatt, Tom O'Dwyer, Kevin Pate, Shawn Yates, Michelle Moore, Andrea Rodarte



Meet Michael Fiore

Michael and his wife, Rosa, have been married for nine years. They met at church while he was working as a missionary in Peru, where they married, had their first child, and spent four years in full-time ministry before moving their family to the U.S. Today, they live, work, and attend church in Wichita Falls. They have three young children: Jasmine (8), Leo (5), and Niko (2). Their church home is Compassion Church. A few years ago, the family combined households with Michael's mom and stepdad to enjoy the benefits of a multi-generational home. After years of working in the family business, Michael is currently in the process of buying the business from his mother. He will soon become the fourth generation to own and operate Smith's Gardentown Farms, a garden store and growing facility in Wichita Falls.



<https://smithsgardentown.com/>

Where did you grow up? Where are your roots?

I grew up in Wichita Falls surrounded by family. My brother, cousins, and I worked in the family business as kids. I ran away from the company and was gone for about ten years. Half of that time, I was attending college at Texas A&M studying Wildlife and Fishery Science with a plan to get into wildlife management or become a game warden. In my degree, I learned a lot of entomology, which is helpful in my work today. After graduation, I had no

intention of being involved in the family business. I moved to Latin America and spent six months in Costa Rica before settling in Peru.

What are some of your favorite things? How do you like to spend your spare time?

I love traveling and anything adventurous. My main hobby is disc golf. It's like golf but superior and is played with a frisbee disc. A couple of my buddies and I play about once a week, as my schedule allows. I also love hunting, fishing, and hiking. Exercise, in general, is part of being able to decompress.



What was the last outing or trip that you took with your family?

The last place we went was the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge this past February. It's a cool place only about an hour away from us. We also enjoy getting away to the Hill Country to visit my brother and my dad. This winter, we're going back to Peru. My youngest was born during Covid, so this will be his first trip to visit Rosa's family.

How did you start your business, and how did you get to where you are now?

I grew up in the family business co-owned by two uncles and my mom. Between the three of them, they had nine kids. We slowly moved away with no interest in being the fourth generation of owners. After traveling abroad, I settled in Iquitos, Peru, to be a full-time missionary working primarily with drug addicts, prostitutes, and homeless people in the slums on the amazon river in the jungle. In 2015, the leadership in the organization where we were serving fell apart. Rosa and I were discussing whether we should start our ministry there or return to the U.S. to the family business. We always stayed connected, but I called my mom to see how things were going. From 2011-2015, Texas was in a horrible drought. With Wichita Falls in stage four water restrictions, no one could water plants for any reason. As a result, revenue was down 80%, and the business could no longer support three owners. One uncle sold his shares for pennies on the dollar. We learned the company was on the verge of permanently closing while our ministry was falling apart in Peru. That night Rosa and I prayed and asked God to send us a sign showing us what we needed to do. The day after we prayed, it began raining in Texas. That day began what would become historic

flooding in the area. Experts said it would take 30 years for the lakes to fill back up, but it only took two months. Once the water restrictions were lifted, the business was suddenly busy and understaffed. Calls from back home became, "How soon can you get up here? We need to get this business up and running again!" Since then, we've had a strong and healthy business. Revenue has more than doubled from \$2 million previously to \$5 million in 2021. My uncle sold his shares to my mother a year and a half ago, making her the sole owner. Now my mother is selling the business to me and my brother, who is joining me as a minority owner.

Our facility is on 26 acres, with over four acres under a greenhouse roof where we grow our plants. The store has been in business for 73 years and enjoys a stellar reputation built by the previous generations. I know I am standing on the shoulders of giants. It's been seven years since I came back to the business. As a kid, working here felt like a chore. I only saw the hard, hot, labor-intensive work, not the rewards or the enjoyment. Now I love this work that allows me creativity and diversity every day, whether waiting on customers, working on strategy, growing plants, or doing design work. We are blessed to be in a thriving industry, helping customers do what brings them joy, happiness, and peace.



I am a visionary type, a risk taker with a willingness to try new things, and I don't mind failing. I am like my grandfather in this way. He modernized and grew the business. With this purchase, I'm excited to have a team around me who can help me determine which of my ideas are worth pursuing and help me execute an action plan. Since Covid, we've been one of the better growth industries in 2020 and 2021. I see growth potential and have many improvement plans. I want to start with updating some of our facilities to bring in some levels of automation to use our labor more wisely. I am also interested in mergers and acquisitions to offer services we do not currently have. I can see growing this business to \$10 million in the coming years.

Another area I enjoy exploring is the addition of advertising through social media. With younger generations interested in gardening, marketing through social media makes sense. At first, I was hesitant but decided I did not want to be closed-minded. I began on Facebook,

where we now have 19K following us, then I hired a full-time employee to create Tik-Tok content for our 50k followers there. The wider audience has brought us new customers who drive in to see us from places such as Dallas, Oklahoma, and even as far as Wisconsin. We have been mentioned in Garden Center Magazine from this exposure, and I have been tapped to speak at a large conference. We are laying the foundation for e-commerce now, so when we go live with shipping, we know we will have customers ready to order.

What service does your company provide?

We provide all kinds of indoor and outdoor plants, vegetables, herbs, trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals, and anything related to plants, including fertilizers, chemicals, gift items, and a Wild Birds Unlimited franchise. On-site, we also have a full-service stone yard and a large variety of aggregate, gravel, sand, topsoil, compost, chop stone, cobblestone, and river rock. Cart-away concrete rentals are a recent addition to our store.

How do you describe your mission and values?

Our mission is “Quality plants. Helpful people.”

We want to be known for quality, pest-free plants that are right for our area, plus the most helpful people around to assist customers in picking out plants that will thrive in their environment. Being upfront with customers is important, so we do not want to sell something to push an item on the shelf. Sometimes a little bit of knowledge is all that is needed. We want our customers to have success in their gardens.

Who are your primary customers?

Single-family homeowners and landscapers.

How and why did you come to C12?

My brother, who is in a C12 group in San Antonio, encouraged me to join. The “why” was to learn more business principles. I know plants and the green industry, but I was very weak in business and wanted to be around people who could help me figure out how to run and grow a business. When I initially joined, using my business as a ministry was a new concept for me and not on my radar. We are working towards it now, and I’m excited about the future.

What do you value about your group?

I love the open and honest camaraderie and how we challenge each other. I like that my group members ask me the hard questions and call me out. I have mentioned my strengths, but I also have weaknesses, and it is helpful to have my group there to encourage me to work on the areas where I am weak. I appreciate that.

What challenges as a business owner have you experienced, and how has your C12 group or chair helped with these challenges?

The biggest challenges I've faced have been cultural. Creating a healthy culture with a good work-life balance continues to be tough. People are used to doing things the same way they've always been done. As a result, facing conflicts as I try to bring change into the organization is the biggest challenge that I continue to see. Many of the people in my C12 group are strong in the areas where I struggle. It has been helpful to witness their example, learn from their struggles, see how they have overcome them, and try to apply those to my business.

How could you help other C12 members, either professionally or personally?

I enjoy discussing strategies regarding marketing, growth and staying optimistic about the future. So many people get caught up in talking about a recession coming. I like to keep a positive and a growth outlook, so I feel I can help in those regards when people tend toward negativity. I enjoy listening to their problems and brainstorming with them for solutions.



How do you use your business as a ministry?

Before joining C12, our company donated to non-profits and other charities, but we did not consider our business a ministry. Now we see and are inspired by what other C12 companies are doing. When thinking about ministry, I realized it could be seen as hypocritical to raise money for outside communities or foreign missions if we are not first taking care of our employees. We use several ministry tools to care for them. Our Smith's Cares program sets aside money each month to use if an employee has an emergency financial situation and needs help. We are working to increase wages to keep up with the cost of living and inflation, as well as being more flexible with PTO and any benefits we can offer. I want employees to feel taken care of and like family first. Once that is in place, I have wide-scale plans to expand our ministry reach outside our community. As an overseas missionary for many years, this is a big passion of mine.