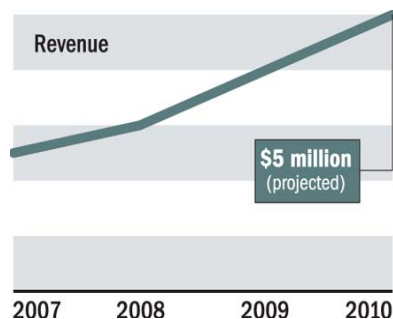


Slow-tended, a business blossoms Plant Fantasies serves a who's who

In 1987, Teresa Carleo did what so many irked employees do when passed over for a promotion: She quit her job to start her own business. She didn't leave with a Rolodex of clients, and she had limited horticulture experience, but neither factor diminished Ms. Carleo's resolve to plant and prune in the concrete jungle of Manhattan. She named her one-woman business Plant Fantasies.

"I had a lot of energy and passion," says Ms. Carleo. That was about all she had. In between cold-calling building managers and owners from her one-bedroom apartment, Ms. Carleo walked the city's streets, keeping her eyes glued for Mother Nature's bounty. Bushes in front of buildings and flora in lobbies represented potential customers. She hit pay dirt when a doorman gave her the number of his employer, Spitzer Engineering, which contracted her to install and maintain indoor plants at its luxury rental, The Corinthian. When the Bernard Spitzer-owned real estate firm asked if she could take on a larger landscaping project—the building's exterior—she responded affirmatively. She took Polaroid snapshots and made a beeline to Otto Keil, owner of a Long Island wholesale nursery. There, she got a quick tutorial on what she should plant and where. A stack of books filled in the gaps. "I didn't know how to price anything and had to ask the nursery," she says.

Soon the fledgling entrepreneur was handling other Spitzer properties, relying on taxis or a "man with a van" to squire her to job sites to install, rotate and water. She got up before sunrise, traveled across the city and took any minor or major project to keep busy. Ms. Carleo took seven years to summon up the courage to move Plant Fantasies, its four employees, stacks of gardening supplies and bushels of greenery out of the apartment she shared with her husband and into an 800-square-foot loft space. Obsessed with meeting her monthly office rent of \$700, Ms. Carleo expanded her ser-



PLANT FANTASIES
FOUNDED 1987
EMPLOYEES 40
PROJECTED 2010 REVENUE
\$5 million



vices to include everything from installing and storing Christmas decorations to tending to her clients' lawns. "Moving was the best thing I did," she says. Eight years ago, Ms. Carleo planted the seeds for even greater growth by becoming a certified woman-owned business—a recognition that has enabled her to win ever-larger and more complex projects, including from New York state, such as constructing green roofs.

Today, from its 3,500-square-foot work space on the West Side, the firm serves a who's who of the city's real estate industry, including The Trump Organization, Macklowe Properties and Jack Resnick & Sons. With 40 employees, Plant Fantasies commands installation fees ranging from \$1,200 for a couple of plantings to \$600,000 for a multilevel, high-end exterior landscape. In a difficult real estate market where property owners are fixated on maintaining appearances to attract tenants, Ms. Carleo's flourishing business is on track to generate \$5 million in revenues this year, a 25% jump over 2009's \$4 million. She still uses the same nursery. "When Teresa first started out, she would ask my opinion, but now she tells me what she wants," says Mr. Keil. "She's an expert now in plants and colors and very fussy, in a good way, for her customers." — Cara S. Trage

See the online video interview [here](#).