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Country Business

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vendorprofile

Rugged Success

BY MOLLY PETRILLA

The beauty and usefulness of jute fiber has helped Capitol Earth Rugs become a top rug vendor.

Some 30 years ago, Ed Back first encountered the floor coverings that would change his life forever. A friend who owned the shop across the street from Ed's house had recently returned from Bangladesh with a few jute rugs. When Ed stopped by one day, he immediately recognized their beauty—and their sales potential.

Not ones to waste time day-dreaming, Ed and his wife, Rose Fitzhugh-Back, hopped a plane to Bangladesh, where they were "awe-struck" by the magnificence and low price of the jute rugs they found at a local market. The couple returned to Arkansas with a few rugs for their own home, a few more to show local storeowners, and a few Bangladeshi contacts. It wasn't a lot to start with, but the Backs were officially in the jute rug business. Today, Capitol Earth Rugs offers strong products and true customer service, which have helped it to earn the honor of being a *Country Business* Vendor of the Year finalist.

The Roots of Jute

Needless to say, the odds were stacked against Ed and Rose when they started



Capitol Earth Rugs' Ed Back and Rose Fitzhugh-Back have introduced jute to countless customers.

the company in 1980. Although jute fiber, which comes from the inside of a reed plant that's similar to bamboo, is one of the strongest and oldest fibers known, most Americans knew very little about it in the early 1980s—and a few companies had even campaigned against it in order to promote their own fibers.

But, the couple's conviction paid off: Capitol Earth Rugs' braided jute rugs are now sold in thousands of stores, and the company offers more than 1,500 braided jute products, including stair treads, chair pads, table accents, tree skirts, and rugs in all colors, shapes and sizes.

Beloved Products, Innovative Designs

"Our innovation is definitely something that sets us apart," Rose says. "We are the pioneers of braided rugs made from jute, and we come up with every single size and every single idea."

That includes their most popular seller: the Random Rug. A prime example of the adage "waste not, want not," each Random Rug is made from bits and pieces of braided jute that are left over when other rugs are created.

The Backs are also proud of their ever-growing hand-stenciled rug collection that, like the rest of the business, began on a small scale and has grown to include dozens of



designs as well as prints from well-known licensed artists.

In 2011, the company will expand its collegiate offerings and launch a line of braided table baskets. "We're always adding to our lines," Rose says. "We keep up on color and style trends, and above all, we listen to our customers to make sure we're meeting their needs."

Thanks to this customers-come-first philosophy and the Backs' creativity and determination, a business that began with one man visiting local stores with a few rugs slung over his shoulder has grown into a successful, widely recognized company. "I always knew that if my products looked better, were priced better and sold better than the competition, then retailers would buy from me," Ed says. And buy from him they have. ■

Molly Petrilla is a freelance writer who frequently writes articles for and about retailers. Read more of her work at www.mollywrites.com.



Jute braided rugs are ideal for porches because they have natural water-repellent characteristics.

Facts at a Glance

Company name: Capitol Earth Rugs, Inc.
Address: 8001 Assembly Court, #21-24, Little Rock, AR 72209
Phone: 800-562-1885
Website: www.earthrugs.com
Date established: 1980
Number of products: More than 1,500
Average wholesale prices: \$4-\$175
Minimum order: No minimum
Best-selling item: Random Rug
Trade shows: Atlanta, Chicago, Columbus, Denver, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Seattle, Valley Forge