BERNARDS — After 17 years of turning rooms full of skeptical developers into his environmental allies, landscape architect Anthony Sblendorio decided in 2011 to open a home and garden store, even though he had no retail experience whatsoever. "It was risky, frankly," he said. "I mean, you gotta remember it was two years after the credit markets imploded."

The Waldwick native founded Back to Nature, his Oldwick-based ecological development firm, in 1994. Since then it has left its green fingerprints on some of the first LEED-certified buildings and communities in New Jersey. So when he started asking home and garden retail industry leaders to show him the ropes, it was an easy sell.

Pat Farrah, co-founder of Home Depot, agreed to help Sblendorio travel the country and assess other consumer home and garden stores. Once Sblendorio settled on a model, it was time to hire a chief executive officer. "Anthony convinced me to leave a large company and good job to be part of something special at Back to Nature," said Chas Fox, former president of Jackson & Perkins, which has cultivated and sold roses in the U.S. for more than 100 years. "Anthony is a ‘thought leader’ and is changing the way New Jersey will look at outdoor space." For the last two years, Sblendorio’s Basking Ridge store has flourished in the face of an economy that has only shown sporadic signs of growth.

Back to Nature was recommending terrariums to its clients long before the glass planters — meant to act as miniature ecosystems — appeared at hipper-than-thou retailer Urban Outfitters or were the subject of do-it-yourself posts on Apartment Therapy, a popular interior design blog. Earlier this month the Small Business Council of America named Sblendorio its Small Business Person of the Year. The Wilmington, Delaware-based nonprofit lobbies lawmakers on behalf of its 350 members. The title places him with some impressive company. In 2011, it went to John Barnard, chairman of Vita-Mix, whose high-end blenders have won acclaim from serious home cooks and professional chefs alike. It’s almost a miracle Sblendorio didn’t know he had been nominated. His wife, Maria Sblendorio, filled out the paperwork and collected endorsement letters from business partners, politicians and clients.
"Obviously he had a very strong nomination and a lot of supporting documents. One of the things the committee looks for is ties to the community and what type of person he or she is," said SBCA executive director Leanne Redstone. "It’s not just whether the business itself is successful. They look at the person and his accomplishments. "As an environmentalist, Sblendorio has had an easy time working with people new to living eco-friendly lives because he tries hard to cheer more than chastise.

"I’m not just judging people saying, ‘You’re bad because you’re not doing this for the environment,’” he said this past Tuesday, sitting on a bench in his Basking Ridge store. "It’s our responsibility to get people inspired to want to do something and not to judge them if they don’t. That’s a big difference, I think." Instead of lecturing people on the virtue of growing their own food, Sblendorio sells logs that have been specially cut and treated so that a crop of mushrooms will sprout on them a week after a customer takes one home. The Back to Nature staff also sets up garden plots, and tends to chicken coops or beehives for green-minded customers who want to know exactly where their food comes from. It’s not as though the architecture firm has fallen by the wayside. The company has worked closely with the Willow School in Gladstone to develop plans for its LEED gold- and LEED platinum-certified buildings.

The U.S. Green Building Council uses the precious metals designation to indicate how many points a structure has been awarded for its sustainable features. "I met him back in 2001. I told him that my wife and I were going to start a school and he said, ‘Wow, you’ve got an incredibly opportunity here,’" said Mark Biedron, the school’s co-founder and director of development. "Back in that day we were still saying sustainable and green like they were new terms."

Now Sblendorio’s firm will play a big role in helping the school, which teaches children from preschool through eighth grade, construct the nation’s first "living" school building. That USGBC classification requires the structure to be entirely off the grid — all solar energy — and improve the surrounding environment, and not just minimize its impact. Just last year Back to Nature wrapped up work on Fern Valley, a 4-home development that’s Hunterdon County’s first sustainable residential community.