

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Heimos Is My Name and Flowers Are My Game

Amy Morris



Even though we mourn the passing of our patriarch, we feel Norwin was the hero everyone should look to. He was a hard-working, self-made man who accomplished so much in his lifetime from humble beginnings. I would like to share some of his accomplishments many people didn't know about him. This is a collaboration from all of my siblings as we laughed and cried.

Pictured: Norwin Heimos in 2010.

At age 10, Dad had the largest paper route in St. Louis in front of Jefferson Barracks. He would distribute papers to the soldiers during the week and collect their money on Friday when they got paid. He learned from these men how important keeping your word was by trusting they would pay him after the fact. Years later, in business, as Dad learned from his newspaper dealings, a handshake was his word to hold up his end of the commitment. As a teen, he would drive weekly to Florida for Grandpa Heimos' produce business, picking up loads of tomatoes and helping out the family. That was important to him.

At 20, Dad married the love of his life, Shirley, and the next year started their family. Norwin and Shirley started their own fruit and produce business in a small storefront house. After saving money, they expanded and built Sappington Fruit and Produce with a large storefront porch filled with fresh fruits and vegetables. Because they didn't sell alcohol, the store was open seven days a week.

Dad also had a large tent on the grocery store parking lot, selling fireworks for the 4th of July. Nightly, he would sleep on a cot in the tent, protecting his inventory from vandals or fire. The money Dad and Mom made on the fireworks funded the purchase of Christmas gifts for their nine children.

By age 30, Dad built his first greenhouses, growing geraniums, mums, poinsettias, and a few vegetables and annuals. All nine of us pitched in to help plant, tag and water the crops. In his late 30s, Dad and Mom built and opened Sappington Garden Shop, which quickly became a successful nursery and gift shop.

At age 40, Dad purchased and renovated the St. Louis Greenhouse facility, which was the oldest greenhouse west of the Mississippi. Being a plant and flower grower, Dad was on top of the weather and knew the effect the full moon had on his crops. He was our own personal Farmer's Almanac! Dad ventured out in the mid-'70s selling blooming and vegetable plants to Schnuck's Markets. This was the first introduction of our industry into grocery retail.

Even though Dad worked hard, there was always time for family fun. The Heimos clan took an annual family vacation to Black River Lodge. The tradition still carries on 65 years later and one that our families look forward to. However, July of 1973, Dad surprised us all with a trip to Disneyland and other LA attractions, including a visit to Ecke's Poinsettia Ranch. We were able to run the fields of poinsettias and had an amazing day with the Ecke family. Fun fact: Since my oldest sister's birth, Dad set aside \$5.00 a week to pay for this family trip. He had incredible discipline to save, which he also instilled in us kids as we grew up.

By 50, Dad expanded his greenhouse operations to Millstadt, Illinois, to grow more annuals, perennials and other flowering plants. He also purchased a farm to grow pumpkins, strawberries, blueberries and Christmas trees. At the same time, Dad was able to enlarge the traditional annual Poinsettia Open House, which he and Mom enjoyed so much! It was a full day for them to visit with family and friends from near and far while sharing the beauty of the colorful poinsettias. This tradition continues with the addition of our poinsettia trial, which started in 2007.

In 1981, Fred Gloeckner, George Lucht and my dad introduced Fischer geraniums to the U.S. This company had a large impact on changing the geranium market in our country.

At 60, N.G. Heimos Greenhouses was the 36th largest greenhouse in the United States, servicing much of the Midwest. Even though at this point the greenhouse was world-renowned, Dad never wanted to receive any accolades for his industry accomplishments. He was very humble in that regard. However, he was always happy to help anyone who asked for his advice in the industry.

A dear friend and colleague, Vaughn Fletcher, had this to say about my dad, "Outspoken, honest and forthright in his business relationships. You always knew where he stood on various topics. Extremely loyal to individuals who manifested professionalism in their business relationship."

At age 70, even though Dad had successfully built 28 acres of greenhouses, his life changed forever. Dad suffered his greatest loss—the death of his wife Shirley. Growing up, we always thought Dad would die first because he worked so hard and so many hours, but God had other plans. For the last 19 years, since Mom's been gone, our family enjoyed Dad 24-7. We caught up on the lost time we missed as children because he worked so hard to provide for Mom and the nine of us. Dad shared so many stories of the past and it was a joy to learn and understand his journey with our family and relatives, his commitment to being generous and his work ethic.

At age 80, he was still building greenhouses and enjoyed working with his children. He also loved spending time with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

At 90, we're saddened that Dad is no longer here with us. We're so grateful for the legacy he left for all of us. **GT**

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