

GROWERTALKS

Web Exclusive

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Chris Beytes

Pike Family Nurseries partners with Carvel's owner

Pike Family Nurseries, the retail garden center chain based in Atlanta, has sold a majority stake in their business to Roark Capital Group. Roark is a private equity company that also is the largest stakeholder in the 425-store Carvel ice cream chain, according to a report in the April 30 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Does this mean we'll see Pike Family Nursery franchises across the country? Probably not. CEO Randy Pike told us they'll stick with the climate Zone and demographics they know, which means the Southeast.

"There are still some areas here in Atlanta that we're going to continue to look at and maybe build into," Randy says. "[Then] we'll start with cities outside of Atlanta that get our advertising—radio, television and newspaper. There are a lot of opportunities, and we really haven't sat down and scoped out where we want to go. There are a lot of ideas on the table."

Founded by Randy's father, William "Pete" Pike, in 1958, the 46-year-old company currently has 18 stores in the metro Atlanta area, along with eight wholesale landscape supply outlets and a design division. They do about \$100 million in annual sales. According to Randy, they've been thinking about expanding for the past five or six years, but they needed a partner—"one who can raise capital, who had our same vision and who didn't want to come in and change all the management," he says.

Roark Capital hadn't returned calls by press time. According to the *Journal-Constitution*, Roark buys stake in profitable, established businesses with the intention of holding them over time.

Commentary

Shawn Welch, a lead partner at Roark, is quoted in a Pike press release as saying, "Gardening is the No. 1 leisure activity in the country ... We see a great opportunity for Pike to continue playing a major role in the niche between 'big box' retailers and 'mom & pop' specialty garden stores."

Can outside investors find happiness in our segment?

We all saw the equity groups in the late '90s that wanted to get rich by consolidating our fragmented industry and capitalizing on "America's No. 1 leisure activity." Hines and Color Spot and the rest are successful, but few on Wall Street has gotten wealthy from gardening.

And what about that niche between big boxes and independents? How viable is it? Frank's has been the leader in that category, currently with 169 stores in 14 states, but they've struggled to find their identity. Then again, there are other small chains that have a long history in that niche, such as Earl May Seed and Nursery, with 50 stores in four Midwestern states; Armstrong Garden Center, with 35 stores in California; and Canada's White Rose Home and Garden Centres, with 22 locations. Note that those three have one common feature: They've stayed in one geographic market, as Randy says Pike will do. And Randy insists that Roark did their homework before investing in Pike. They're aware of the seasonal, weather-influenced nature of the business.

Maybe that, combined with Pike's 18-store base, their tremendous focus on employee training (they have a multimillion dollar training facility just for that purpose), strong financial backing from their new partner and a "systematic" approach to expansion, as Randy calls it, will be what it takes to create a multi-store niche garden retailer for the 21 st Century.

USDA wants your opinion on import certification

Do you have an opinion on the certification of offshore production facilities located in regions where *Ralstonia solanacearum* race 3 biovar 2 is known to occur and that ship product to the United States? If so, you've got until June 22 to make your points to the USDA, which is taking public comments on the topic until then. The USDA is finalizing the establishment of a certification program for imported plants. E-mail your comments to regulations@aphis.usda.gov. Don't send any attachments; put your name and address in the message and type "Docket No. 03-019-2" in the subject line. Or go to www.regulations.gov for instructions on submitting comments.

Blooms of Bressingham adds Canadian propagators

Those of you in the Great White North who are looking for Blooms of Bressingham perennial varieties are in luck, because the company now has three propagators in Canada: Bloom Source in Ontario, Bowman Greenhouses in British Columbia and Pepiniere Charlevoix Inc. in Quebec. It's part of an overall consolidation of their new plant program, done in an effort to coordinate worldwide releases of new varieties, they say.

Finally ...

Mike Cherim of The Green Spot (check out his pest management discussion board at www.greenmethodsforum.com) is a frequent contributor to the GrowerTalks discussion board. He helped out recently by answering a query from what I'm guessing is a home gardener who had a question on tiger lilies, which he successfully answered. Now she thinks she's found a perennial expert, and poor Mike is left recommending books (might I recommend *Continuous Bloom* or the *Ball Perennial Manual*: www.ballbookshelf.com?).

Anyway, could one of you perennial experts (Friel, you paying attention?) go out to www.growertalks.com/discussion/ and help [luvflowerz](#) with her perennial questions?

See you next week,

Chris Beytes
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GrowerTalks