

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Don't Go By the Book

Barbara Mulhern

How does a small wholesale grower compete with larger nurseries in today's uncertain market? For Ralph Ostendorf, owner of Ostendorf Greenhouses in Cincinnati, Ohio, the answer is to not even try. Instead, he suggests, limit your plant selection and go beyond the standard knowledge about how to grow.

"I only have 50,000 sq. ft., so as a wholesaler I'm small," says Ralph, who grew up in the greenhouse business and became sole owner of Ostendorf Greenhouses in 2001. "I don't necessarily go by the book for everything. Science can only tell you so much. It's an art form to create a finished product where the customer will say, 'Wow.'"

Ostendorf Greenhouses is 100 percent wholesale. Its primary customers are in the greater Cincinnati area and include independent garden centers, grower-retailers and a handful of independent florists. They don't sell to any big box stores.

Ralph's major crops include geraniums, gerbera daisies and Rieger begonias. This year, he has approximately 50,000 geraniums, 28,000 gerberas and 10,000 begonias. "We grow all in pots—no flats," Ralph says. "Almost all of it is in 4.5-in. pots. We have been doing it that way for some time."

Although growing in pots takes up more space, it provides the customer with a much larger plant. "I try to grow a quality plant. I try to give it an extra week or two beyond what most people would. I'd much rather sit on something a little bit longer than send it out before I think it's ready," he says.

Ostendorf Greenhouses grows plants year-round although spring is the busiest season. Ralph tries to run the business with what he calls a "skeleton crew." This includes just two to three employees in addition to family members.

Passion for plants

Ralph, who has a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, had no plans to go into the greenhouse business even though he had helped out since he was a kid. His uncle had started the greenhouse in 1964; previously, both Ralph's father and uncle had worked for their uncle, who ran a separate greenhouse business.

After college, Ralph worked in electrical engineering for six years. At the time, his uncle still owned Ostendorf Greenhouses and Ralph says he didn't see a future for himself in the business. But during that time his uncle died, leaving the business to Ralph's father, George. In 1998 Ralph decided to get out of electrical engineering and join the family greenhouse operation. "This had always been a passion of mine," he says. In 2001, Ralph became sole owner of the business. Although George is officially retired, he still periodically helps out.

Ralph's passion for plants has carried over into his involvement within the industry. He is on the OFA board of directors and is vice-president of the Cincinnati Flower Growers Association. The Cincinnati Flower Growers Association, he says, is a very "vibrant" organization that has 30 or more active members.

"Through the Cincinnati Flower Growers Association we hold monthly meetings. A different member hosts each meeting and we take tours of their facility," Ralph says. "I have done that a couple of times and through that we have picked up some new customers."

Predominantly, though, Ostendorf's new customers come via word of mouth. Paying very close attention to detail, they believe, is the best way to get new customers and to keep current customers coming back.

"Geraniums and gerberas are really detailed crops," Ralph notes. "It's important to constantly look at your crop to see how it's performing. Also, find something that's hard for a grower-retailer to devote the time to and become good at."

Ralph has these additional tips for other small greenhouse growers:

- > Spend time weighing the pros and cons of what you do.

For example, he says, in his situation he could spend less time on his plants but he might then have a very different customer base. "The 'science' part of growing—versus the 'art'—says that a certain geranium has to be out the door in 10 weeks. If I just did what the science says, I might be selling to some smaller chain stores (versus independent garden centers and grower-retailers)," he says.

- > Carefully select which plants you grow.

"We have increased our business lately with the grower-retailers because of the selection I have," Ralph says. In the past, he didn't grow fall crops but he has recently added new product lines. "We now do a fall mum crop and we have added a spring pansy line," he says.

- > Talk with other growers.

Ralph feels strongly that it's not enough to just show up at events such as the OFA Short Course, which he attends every year. "Don't just go there. Try to meet people and talk to people. Get as much information as you can. People in this industry are very open," he says. One of the best ideas he got from attending the OFA Short Course was to begin using Florel on his geraniums, which has resulted in "a fuller plant," he says.

- > Talk with your sales reps.

Your sales reps, Ralph explains, can be very knowledgeable not only about plants but also about issues such as simple automation for certain crops. In his case, he talked with his sales reps and read industry trade

magazines to get information in advance about installing drippers for his pansy and mum crops.

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