

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Jake Koornneef: A Grower's Life

Lynn P. Griffith, Jr.



How do you measure the success of someone's life? Some might measure it by the degree of fame or fortune achieved. Or the number of children and grandchildren left to carry on. Others might look at the number of friends a person had or how well respected they were by his peers. Some attach more weight to how many people he helped or how much he gave to the less fortunate. Others might measure the success of someone's life by the extent to which he made the world a better place.

By every one of those measures, the life of Jake Koornneef was a resounding success. The founder and owner of Delray Plants in Delray Beach, Florida, Jake passed away in March of this year at the age of 80. He leaves behind three children, eight grandchildren and seven great grandchildren.

He was truly a self-made man. Born in 1930 to a family of greenhouse flower growers in a small town in Holland, he would get up before dawn to endure long days working in the greenhouse.

With limited opportunities in post-war Holland, Jake set sail for Canada in 1953, knowing no English and with little money in his pocket. He worked in a foundry until he was able to buy eight acres of orchard, which he turned into Waterfront Greenhouses, growing cut mums and roses. Two years later he was successful enough to bring his true love Mary to Canada to be with him and raise a family. They were married for more than half a century.

The nursery ultimately switched to seasonal flowering potted plants and produced vegetables in the summer. In an effort to escape the high Canadian heat bills, Jake bought Delray Plants in 1968 with partners, figuring he would not need greenhouses or heat in southern Florida. He turned out to be wrong on both of those counts, but the nursery became a success. He moved permanently to Delray in 1974, growing cuttings and potted flowers. Seeing a limited future in these crops, he switched to foliage plants such as schefflera and marginata in 1977 and 1978. The operation grew from 14 acres to 60 acres in Palm Beach County and another 800 acres of foliage production in the town of Venus.

Jake believed in doing things right. He built excellent nursery facilities, used the best potting soils and fertilizers, and hired the most talented growers he could find. He was truly a visionary, seeing potential in certain types of plants before the rest of the market even knew of them. With faith in his convictions, he would often plant these new items by the hundreds of thousands.

To Jake, growing was his life, his work, his passion and his hobby. He was a very religious man, though I never knew that, because whenever I was with him all we would talk about was plants. He believed in being the first into work and the last out, and felt the business owner should be seen working alongside his employees, which Jake frequently did. He also traveled the world looking for new plants to produce and new methods of growing, but he never would stop to take in the local sites and sounds.

He often helped people who were down on their luck, helping out with encouragement and even financially, but he never wanted it known how much he helped other people.

My favorite memory of Jake was about two years ago, when I had to visit Delray Plants to take some photos for a *GrowerTalks* article. It was close to noon on a Saturday, with temperatures pushing 90F with high Florida humidity. There was Jake, near 80 years old, out in the greenhouse trimming back a bench full of 6-in. plants. As one of the best and most successful nurseryman in the United States, he didn't have to be there on a Saturday. He simply did it because he loved it.

As you close this magazine and head back into your own greenhouse, I hope you will feel and share some of Jake Koornneef's passion for growing. Jake knew what a true privilege it was to create beautiful plants for a living. **GT**

—Lynn P. Griffith, Jr., owner of A&L Southern Agriculture Laboratories in Deerfield Beach, Florida.