

GROWERTALKS

Features

6/15/2010

Trip Report: Island Time

Jennifer Zurko

We flew into MacArthur Airport in Islip anticipating two days of jam-packed visits. It had been almost a decade since Chris visited with the growers and garden retailers that reside on one of the most populated islands in the world (ahead of even Ireland and Jamaica, according to Wikipedia). One thing we knew we would find—a lot of changes since *GrowerTalks* was there last and loads of thoughts about the current state of the industry.

Bring in the new

Our first stop was Ivy Acres in Calverton, where the main facility was in a frenzy getting product ready for shipment to the 56 Home Depot stores this Van de Wetering operation services.

Not only was Ivy Acres in the midst of finishing the last of the spring products, but Peter Allen, vice president of planning and procurement, and his team were working with many new changes and improvements, including more growing space. Peter told us that 10 to 15 years ago, they used to primarily grow seed geraniums in 1801 trays and 6-in. pots. No hanging baskets and some vegetables. Now, they “grow it all,” he said. The 22 new Haygrove tunnels with ECHO-Veyor system alone hold about 1,800 hanging baskets—which doesn’t include the ones filled with petunias and geraniums in the main part of the facility. (See Chris’ article “Tunnel Vision” in the June issue of *GrowerTalks*.)

In the last Haygrove tunnel, we saw lots of perennials—more than they’ve had in years, according to Peter. He said Ivy Acres wants to be a bigger player in the perennial market, and while traveling in Europe, owner Jack Van de Wetering found an innovative container that may give them the push they need. The new Ivy Acres Euro Pot is a 1-gal. container with an elongated bottom—similar to pots for tree liners—and offers a better growing environment because of the deep root system. The narrower profile gives Ivy Acres about 50% more bench space. The pot also has dual-purpose handles—for tags and for customer grab-and-go convenience, which can increase sales by as much as 30%, according to their own consumer research. The company has licensed the use of the container to other perennial growers and Home Depot has added it to their Vigoro program in 62 stores this year.

Keeping it in the family

In Mattituck, we visited Eric Keil who runs the eastern operation of Otto Keil Greenhouses. This third-generation business grew from a small greenhouse run by Eric’s German grandfather into a supplier of more

than 600 independent garden centers. In 1971, Eric's father Otto and uncle Norman stepped in to run the business, and after 25 years, decided to split the company between their sons. Eric and his brothers Greg, Jeff and Scott (who operate the Huntington location) cater to IGCs, and Norman, Jr. runs the half that now sells to big box stores.

To make themselves stand out among other growers, they work hard to make their product look different, which they do with their own brand called Emma's Garden—named after Eric's grandmother. He said they do grow some other branded products, but they really focus on emphasizing their own name.

Although their business is not as technologically advanced as other growers because of the breadth of product they grow, they make up for it with top-notch service. Eric said they deliver anywhere in the metro area within one or two days and they take orders until 6 p.m., which allows them to “deliver the right product at the right time. We have customers we go to every day and most places can't do that,” said Eric.

Asked if he's happy with being in the family business, Eric smiles and says, “What's better than selling flowers? I can't think of a better product. And my customers are great people.”

Make room for Junior

The other half of the original Keil business, Norman Keil Greenhouses, is based in St. James. Norman runs the operation with his son Norman, Jr., selling to chain stores Costco and Stop & Shop. Both Normans were extremely optimistic for the season, telling us this year was completely opposite from 2009, which was the worst year they've ever had. The good weather Long Island was experiencing helped with the demand and the reason why the shipping area was bustling with activity.

Norman, Jr.'s influence on the business can be seen in its new facilities and improvements, which were results of deep discussions he had with his father about the need to be innovative. Although Norman, Sr. needed to be convinced to buy the new Visser transplanter, he has seen the labor and time savings it provides—they can transplant 80,000 4-in. pots in one day instead of the 35,000 they used to do by hand. Plans are also in the works to tear down the old Quonset houses and replace them with vented-roof houses.

You have to be willing to change in this business to maintain your success, said Norman, Jr. “I've worked in this business my whole life and in that amount of time, I've seen how different it is now. Before, you could get away with putting absolute garbage out there and it would sell. If you even attempt to do something like that now ... you shouldn't even bother. The quality has to be perfect.”

Simple success

The greenhouses were bustling with activity at C.J. Van Bourgandien Growers, a 3.5-acre greenhouse of typical Dutch houses and benches located in Peconic. Owner Bob Van Bourgandien runs the business alongside his brother Mark and sister Tracy. They grow a lot of geraniums, and although it's still their main crop, Bob says poinsettias have pulled ahead as No. 1 in terms of dollars. The poinsettia bottom line is also helped by the fact that they get 90,000 cuttings from their own stock.

Because they keep their product offering simple, the Van Bourgandien's are able to automate with machinery,

which they upgrade every few years. It's not all robots and buttons, however. Bob says his 80-year-old aunt still comes in to help with the transplanting.

Bob said business had been going pretty well. "Some of our customers are suffering recession pains," he said. "But last year [2009] was still our best year ever because we programmed more based on 2007-2008. And we've saved over \$100,000 on inputs this year."

His major concern is the new generation of gardeners. "They don't want to get out in the yard and get dirty," said Bob. "We have to convince them that getting out there and getting dirty and picking their own vegetables is the greatest thing going. Otherwise, they'll just go to the supermarket for their vegetables."

Doin' it all ... himself

Mike Pazienza, owner of Bloomin Haus Nursery in Holtsville, has been a grower/retailer since 1987, growing 99% of the product he sells in small, Quonset-style houses with knowledge that was all self taught. Through trial and error, Mike has developed a successful growing operation that helps build the retail part of his business.

Because he doesn't have headaches over shipping, Mike is able to grow in containers that you can't get anywhere else—like deck rail planters, cone-shaped bark or leaf-covered hanging baskets, and 20-in. moss baskets. He also has a huge retail area for perennials (which he gets from other suppliers) where consumers can choose from a wide range of plants, trees and shrubs.

Near the perennial area is a place where customers can buy ice cream and visit the petting zoo, but across the street is where the retail magic really happens. When you walk under the large gazebo-like entrance, you get a map listing all of the plants from A to Z and the exposure for each. There are call buttons strategically placed throughout the retail area if people need assistance. And the Thunder Alley water tower keeps the kids busy "panning for gold" to win a special prize.

Although the weather was a little windy and overcast, Mike said his sales were up from the previous year, giving him an optimistic view about the season as a whole.

From corner to block

In Oceanside, we stopped in to The Dee's Nursery & Florist to see owner Joey DiDominica. Joey's dad started the business from his home on the corner of Atlantic and Lincoln Avenues selling cut flowers when he was 13 years old. As he got older, he would purchase more land behind his house as it became available and they continued to expand into the 1970s. The glass greenhouse we saw driving up was built by Private Gardens in 2002, and Joey said his customers "love it." They don't have additional expansion plans currently, but Joey told us there are big plans for re-organizing the inside—including moving the florist (which is 20% of his business) and gift shop up front into the newer retail area.

The Dee's customer base comes primarily by word of mouth or local traffic, so they were never big on advertising, said Joey. Recently, they've turned to events such as an open house and an impatiens promotion held at the start of the season. Joey admitted that 2009 was a tough year for them because of the rainy weather, so they'll continue to make up for it with their annual Fourth of July half-price sale and special

promotions during other seasons like Halloween and Christmas.

Walking through the garden center, it's evident that Joey loves brands. He feels that POP and signage are "like a nice pair of shoes"—an accessory that can be the finishing touch on the whole package. The Dee's offers a few different brands of vegetable and annuals products, and he's contemplating doing his own pot one day.

Traffic stoppers

Our last stop was Locust Avenue Farm in Bohemia, where we met brothers Steve and Chris D'Agostino. Originally a two-location operation, the 5-acre farm, which is 95% retail, focuses on what they do best—large combos with five to seven different varieties, 12-in. pots and lots of pansy flats.

Steve and Chris pride themselves on their high-end products their customers clamor for; beautiful combination moss baskets and fiber pots go for \$68 and \$58, respectively. They also have traditional geranium combos with dracaena spike, and mix it up by replacing some varieties with bacopa or portulaca. Steve said they really try to streamline their offerings so it's easier for the customer to purchase ... and easier for them to handle.

An issue that Steve and Chris have to deal with every year isn't shipping problems or the recession, it's the neighbors. Their business is smack-dab in the middle of a residential area, so the locals get restless every spring because of the traffic, said Steve. They would like to expand, but it seems that the red tape is extra sticky when dealing with the town. "You don't even know we're here half the time," said Steve. "It's just that this time of year, you can't get down our block."

Despite their cranky neighbors, Steve and Chris said spring was looking good and they were really looking forward to the Mother's Day holiday, which is always a big weekend for them. Although they're the only garden center left out of five others that have since closed their doors, Steve said—as did most of the growers and retailers we visited—he worries more about the weather than the state of the economy. **GT**