

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Sixth Generation and Soaring

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Season's Harvest Greenhouse in Menomonie, Wisconsin, came in just under the wire. With the greenhouse expansion owner Josh Bergmann plans next year, their new square footage will put them over the "Under an Acre."

Josh grew up in the greenhouse business, and was the first of the sixth generation to open his own store. Of all the family businesses, which include his uncles' and mother's greenhouses, his is the fifth independently owned and operated location. Josh's great-great-great grandfather delivered vegetables and milk from his farm to the city folks in Stillwater, Minnesota. Every generation after that has had a part in the growing industry. In the late 1970s, Josh's father, Tom,

continued to help his parents with the Minnesota greenhouse, then opened a greenhouse with his wife, Ivanna, and their children in Clayton, Wisconsin. When Tom was killed in a car accident 11 years ago, Ivanna, Josh and his brothers and sister took over the store in Clayton.

Six years ago, Josh and his wife Katie began their own business selling annuals at farmers' markets. In 2007, they opened Season's Harvest in Menomonie to appease the people who couldn't wait to buy the annuals at the farmers' markets. The store is 20 miles east of Eau Claire, 70 miles west of the Twin Cities and four miles north of Interstate 94, which draws customers from the Chippewa Valley. Katie does double duty in the "nursery" department: When she's not helping out at Season's Harvest, she is a labor and delivery nurse at the local hospital. Speaking of children, Josh and Katie have the seventh generation of greenhouse owners waiting in the wings with their three young children, Emma, Sully and Sophia.

How Season's Harvest shapes up

The indoor growing area of 38,000 sq. ft. is set up in retail fashion, says Josh, with wide aisles. Outside is a 10,000 sq. ft. display area for trees and shrubs. Josh says they grow their own apple, cherry, pear and zone-hardy trees, but not shade trees and shrubs. Josh doesn't travel much to buy trees since he's busy hooking up electric, pouring concrete and constructing new buildings, so he trusts his sales reps to pick the best specimens.

Josh hopes to get in one more year of sales, then build a storefront and have the parking lot paved. He says this will allow them to sell in all seasons. They now work out of a pole shed connected to the greenhouses, which are open for retail sales from April through October. Season's Harvest hosts Fall Family Fun every weekend in October with hayrides, train rides, a corn maze, llamas and donkeys. The animals are borrowed from Josh and Katie's 50-acre hobby farm. In addition to the llamas and donkeys, Josh and Katie have Jacob sheep, beef cattle and goats.

Eighty percent of Season's Harvest sales are from annuals with a rapidly growing line of perennials. They don't grow tropicals, but will sell the plants used for displays. What they do grow are tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, cabbage, squash, pumpkins and herbs sold in four-packs and 3½-in. pots. Josh said they buy bulk seeds such as peas, beans, sweet corn, squash, sunflowers, pumpkins, herbs and cole crops, then package them in Season's Harvest containers.

Menomonie is a small college city with an energetic community of more than 15,000 people. It's home to several industries, including a glass manufacturer, a metal can manufacturer, and ConAgra. The demographics, according to the 2000 census, are nearly even males to females, with the largest age group being 16 to 24. Josh says customers of all ages frequent Season's Harvest, with 50% of the greenhouse's demographic being women 40 and over.

Dishing out good advice

No matter the age of the customer, Josh's No. 1 tip is to realize the importance of the relationship between the garden center and the customer, especially for the family-owned business in a small community. Josh suggests listening to customers in their entirety before answering, allowing you to give them complete answers to their questions. They may not be talking about plants at times, but simply may need a friend to listen. Be a listener, make them feel comfortable and have a genuine feeling toward the customers because they can sense insincerity. Josh urges his employees to be honest with the customers and to not be afraid of giving advice and suggesting plants that are complementary to those in their carts. Josh often refers to past conversations and memories when he sees a customer. He says garden centers need to have great quality products and to be destinations where people like to spend time. Every Mom-and-Pop store should have "quality and relationship" in their mission statements.

Josh also suggests ramping up automation to transfer savings to higher paid employees. While the dirt mixers, flat fillers, transplanter and watering equipment are expensive, they will pay for themselves after years of use and savings on labor. Once the profit is realized, put the money toward keeping the experienced employees who will make connections with the customers.

Last, but certainly not least, Josh advises to never throw away a *GrowerTalks* magazine. He saves all the issues and frequently pulls them off the shelf for reference. For instance, this spring he planted bracteanthas and remembered reading about them in a past issue. The John Gaydos-authored piece appeared in October 2008, and offered advice on moisture, fertility, temperatures, pinching and growth regulators for the plants. The 30 minutes that Josh spent searching for the magazine and reading the article resulted in superior bracteanthas for the season. **GT**