

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Northern Exposure

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To call Ron Sexton a Renaissance man would be an understatement. In his 65 years, he has been a newspaper delivery boy, a general contractor, a carpenter, a builder of campers, an inventor, a designer, a radio ad salesman, a manager of a doors and windows business, a statewide distributor for Sunglo greenhouses and, for the last 35 years, one of the key reasons that Trinity Greenhouse in Soldotna, Alaska, is a solid success.

Twenty years ago in the April 1991 issue of *GrowerTalks*, the Under An Acre piece written by Julie A. Martens featured the Sexton brothers, owners of Trinity Greenhouse: Ron and his wife Kathy, and Dan and his wife Juli. Since that time, there have been the highs and lows of owning a business: Dan's semi-retirement, cut-backs, additions and improvements.

But one thing remains constant—Ron's unflagging passion.

In 1974, Ron and Dan and their extended families moved from southern California to the Alaskan Kenai Peninsula. Ron and Dan moved their general contracting business from California and shifted it up north.

When he wasn't building, Ron donned his inventor's cap and developed the "Kwik Measure Shortening Dispenser," a device that measures exact amounts without the greasy mess. While he was in Seattle to have parts made for his invention, he saw an ad for Sunglo Greenhouses. He brought the idea to Alaska where he and his brother became the distributors. They grew plants to show off the greenhouses and customers looking at the greenhouses asked to purchase the plants. One year later, in the spring of 1977, Trinity Greenhouse was open for business with a commercial-sized greenhouse.

Today, the covered growing area is 25,000 sq. ft., an increase of 8,000 sq. ft. in 20 years. There's a 15,000-sq. ft. outdoor display area, an "apple orchard" with apple and cherry trees, a courtyard, a dining area, a "rose garden" with 75 rose bushes on display, a tree yard and the "shrubway." "We like to create the most inviting environment possible," says Ron. Between the greenhouses are 12-ft. spaces for snow removal, a necessity in most states, not only in Alaska.

In 2005, after 41 years of the brothers' business partnership, Dan had to slow down for health reasons. He

remains at the greenhouse from April to June. Of their partnership, Ron says, “We complemented one another, we worked well together.” Dan did the scheduling of what to grow and when to grow it; Ron came up with the program and sold Dan on the benefits of using a computer in 1984. Dan continues to take care of the seeding, the plug growing area and the scheduling, and is teaching Ron the components of the growing schedule.

Customers continue to travel locally and from a distance of 150 to 175 miles—Anchorage and beyond—to get to Trinity Greenhouse. Ron says the customers like the quality, prices, service, displays and the spacious areas. “People bubble about what we do here,” he says. Ron sees slightly more women than men in the store. He says his customers are “stable people who are entrenched in the community.” He adds, “Many people who live in Kenai, but work up north spend \$2,000 to \$4,000 to beautify their homes.”

Trinity Greenhouse is strictly a retail grower, open for business with 16 employees from March 1 to September 1. Customers who are anxious to get plants in the ground have to wait until June, after the possibility of frost. To appease the cabin-fevered customers as they did 20 years ago, Reserve-a-Basket begins March 1. Money down will ensure each customer a bounteous hanging basket on June 1. Ron’s wife Kathy handles the baskets. She admits that it’s a lot of paperwork, but Ron adds, people come in wanting to smell dirt. Ron even sells his own dirt—5,500 bags a year of a specially mixed secret-ingredient soil.

Ivy, Martha Washington geraniums, hanging baskets, bedding plants, roses, tomatoes, fuchsia, Non-Stop begonias—“We grow as much as we can; we like to have control of our own products. When we ship things in from the lower 48, there can be problems,” says Ron.

In the 20 years since *GrowerTalks* caught up with Ron and Dan, they grew the business with deliberate thought. “When we’ve had the time and the money, we’ve made improvements; slow growth is better than fast growth with problems.” If slow and steady wins the race, Ron says, “We’re the tortoise.”

Ron says that he would like to reduce his 120-hour workweek to 40 hours by the time he’s 70. He’s looking to make his exit and will sell the greenhouse to the right person—someone who will love it as much as he does. “Every year I am in awe as I see a tiny speck of a seed sprout and develop into a marvelous plant. We work in a great occupation.”

Tips from Ron

- Don’t worry about what the other garden centers or growers are doing—have them worry about what you’re doing.
- They’re a small operation, but know the value of equipment. They have a 4-color printer capable of printing color newsletters, various brochures and handouts, gift certificates, signage and tag labels. Their 1.5-yd. soil mixing operation can produce all their soil needs and fill potting soil bags. They’ve been using a Vandana Seeder since 1983.
- Make your retail space more than selling plants. Develop large plant displays that are not for sale, just for people to enjoy. Give them a place to sit and relax and absorb the beauty of your unique business.

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