GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Speak Softly and Grow Big Palms

Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio

"It is true of the Nation, as of the individual, that the greatest doer must also be a great dreamer."
Theodore Roosevelt,
Berkeley, California, 1911

Theodore Roosevelt Moody III was bestowed with the impressive name due to family lore that places his great-grandfather at the Battle of San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War.

As a boy growing up in Harlan, Kentucky, Ted helped his grandmother grow and can vegetables. At age 11, he and his family moved to Florida where one of his grandfathers who had come decades earlier drove a taxi and grew coconuts. Ted's father worked in landscaping with his son at his side. At 20 years old, Ted worked at a nursery in all aspects of landscaping.



In the early 1980s, west of Lantana, Florida, Ted had his first nursery with a partner. He went out on his own in 1985 and has been at the current West Palm Beach location for 20 years as Ted Moody Plant Services. "I am the owner, secretary and mechanic. I've been growing for 40 years and I really enjoy it," says Ted.

His wholesale, retail and broker business is what Ted calls a building industry landscape nursery. His property includes 2 acres with his home and an 800 sq. ft. mist house. "We're on a one-lane road with no traffic. There are four to six nurseries down the main road. We were able to put a sign on that main road and it helps business," says Ted.

He grows shrubs like Green Island ficus and crotons, plus 10 types of palms such as the Adonidia, which grows only to heights of 20 ft. to 30 ft. "Around here, many houses are so large that there are no yards, so the smaller palms work better," Ted says. "In 2010 there were severe freezes, which hurt the palms and cracked the trunks. There was a lot of loss, so we're leaning away from growing as many as we used to. We used to grow thousands and thousands a year," he adds.

The plants are grown from seed and liners. The mist house waters the cuttings automatically every 10 minutes for seven to eight seconds. “Different plants take different amounts of water. If we’re rooting a ficus, which we don’t grow too many now since the whiteflies are so bad, it requires more water than a colder climate plant like viburnum,” says Ted.

The plants come in all sizes: shrubs from 18 in. to 30 in., and palms from 1 in. to 5 ft. “A palm in a pot can be $45 and in the ground it’s $125. We’ve gone to the work of moving and planting it so it’s a higher price, but there are always exceptions,” says Ted. There are large palms on the property—15 ft. and 35 ft. If a customer buys a large tree he or she must pay for the crane to move it. Ted says, “The 8 ft. to 10 ft. trees fly out of here. We have a van, a pick-up and two trailers for deliveries. We charge delivery prices to pay for the gas,” he says.

In Florida, it could get as cold as the high 20s. When cold temperatures are expected, Ted covers the plants with a thermal cloth and stacks them in the mist house. “Palms are resilient. Many people think that palms are tropical, but some like the date palm and the Washingtonia palm can take hard freezes,” he says.

“Palms require different treatment. Certain palms get deficiencies of magnesium. They get a certain look—their fronds get brown and they get ‘frizzle top,’” says Ted, who also said the Queen palm is no longer popular due to borers and fungus.

Ted’s favorites are the Adonidia, due to its small size and majestic gray trunk, and the Foxtail palm that is native to Australia and takes the cold well.

Florida is second to California with the most nurseries in the country. Ted says, “Some haven’t made it through [the recession]. We’re small and we’ve cut costs. We used to have four full-time employees, now we have one full-time employee.” Ted will hire one more person for one week this season for cutting and planting. “It’s an as-needed situation. It keeps labor costs down,” he says. Although, when Ted’s grandson, who is 9, has his next birthday, he’ll start helping at the nursery by pulling weeds to earn spending money.

“You have to change your thinking and direction for your customers, but there are no free estimates anymore. Now it will cost $20 to $40 for me to come out. In the past I would walk around and give ideas for free. Today I tell them, ‘You give me the work and the cost comes off the bill,’” says Ted.

He does fewer than 10 landscape jobs a year. “We do have customers come in with their plant people, who pick out and buy from me, and then have their people install the plants. Preferably, I want to deal with the professionals.”

There are many nurseries in the area, but Ted looks at them as customers and not competition. “I sell a lot of plants to garden centers and nurseries,” he says. The neighbors buy plants, too. “How can you turn down a sale in this economy?” he asks.

Cost-cutting tips from Ted:

- “Use pre-emergent granular for weed control. It saves on labor. Use a liquid fertilizer spray tank. It saves on cost.”

- “Labor is one of the most expensive things. Everything to do with growing a plant has gone up—more money for pots, more money for soil. We buy used pots and wash them, which has cut our costs by 300%.” **GT**

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Pam Buddy-D’Ambrosio is a freelance writer in New Rochelle, New York.