

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Behind the Business: The Birth of Proven Winners

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This month: Proven Winners. Everyone knows how far the brand has come in its short 20-year existence, but few know how it originated.

“When you’re in retail, you need to have something to attract customers,” says Evelyn Weidner of Weidner’s Gardens, Encinitas, California. The small retail nursery, started in 1973 as a retirement project by Evelyn and her husband, Bob (a lifelong nurseryman and plantsman), was originally known for its

dig-your-own tuberous begonias and fuchsia baskets. Then, through happenstance, they acquired a lovely brunfelsia and added it to their selection, highlighting the new plant on the top corner of their annual postcard.

The young Proven Winners. (Front) Tom Smith, John Rader; (Back) Henry Huntington, Evelyn Weidner, Garry Grueber.

“Then, of course, the next year, that corner on the postcard had to be filled [with yet another new variety],” Evelyn says. “So every year we would have a new plant. The customers expected it.”

That search for new varieties put Bob and Evelyn in touch with well-known Germany young plant business Kientzler. Kientzler specialized in vegetatively propagated flowering plants such as New Guinea impatiens. Owner Ludwig Kientzler would come to America to visit customers like the Ecke Ranch, a neighbor of the Weidners. While in the neighborhood, he’d drop in on Bob and Evelyn. “If we had something new we gave it to Kientzler,” Evelyn recalls. “And if Kientzler had something new, he gave it to us.”

By the early 1990s, Kientzler had acquired the rights to a few unusual varieties from Australia and elsewhere, including an interesting hanging basket plant called scaevola. With these Australian natives, plus some other unusual genetics, Kientzler felt they had something new and different enough to warrant plant patent protection, plus a wider distribution than Weidner’s Gardens could offer. But who should get the license? The

big brokerage firms were too big—a handful of quirky varieties might get lost in their long lists.

Instead, Kientzler's Garry Grueber and Weidner's head grower John Rader had an idea: develop a network of like-minded young plant companies that would work together to jointly trial, produce and market exciting new plant varieties. With the financial backing of businessman Gerry Church, John bought Weidner's liner business from Evelyn (who'd lost Bob a few years earlier), then joined with two of Kientzler's other New Guinea impatiens licensees, Four Star Greenhouses in Michigan and Pleasant View Gardens in New Hampshire, to form a new marketing company to sell these interesting new plants. Four Star and Pleasant View, along with John's new EuroAmerican Propagators in California, were geographically diverse enough to reach the entire country with young plants, but small and focused enough to give the varieties the attention they deserved. That was 1992.

"So they're just this little fledgling group without a name," Evelyn recalls. But they did have a focus: trial and introduce unique, patented plants, produced from clean stock and accompanied with aggressive marketing. Build in a royalty fee for the breeders, as well as a marketing fee to help fund advertising and promotion.

Now for a name. The fateful moment took place in a brainstorming session in the small offices at Weidner's Gardens. John Rader recalls that day.

"The liner production side of the Weidners' business had the name 'Weidners' and then the tagline, 'Proven Winners In New Plants.' I had the name Proven Winners in my mind, but I didn't say it because I thought it was too corny! In the discussion, Mary said, 'How about Proven Winners?' Neither Tom [Smith, owner of Four Star] nor Henry [Huntington, owner of Pleasant View] was there. I later got on the phone to Tom and asked him what he thought of the name Proven Winners. He thought it was great. I don't recall the communication with Henry, but I'm sure I must have talked to him at some point about it. It's always embarrassing for me to admit that initially back then I thought the name was corny!" **GT**