GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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# Creating Fireworks with Plants

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Like the record promoters of the 1950s, Steve Rosenbaum loaded his trunk and took to the road, but instead of pushing vinyl, he peddled tropical plants. He began growing tropicals in his parents' backyard as a hobby when he was 13 years old. Five years later, in 1976, he had a business selling the plants from his car.

"It was intimidating at first until I got to know the buyers, then it became fun when I surprised them with plants," says Steve. "They would get excited and ask, 'I wonder what Steve brought us today?'" he adds.

He built two greenhouses in his parents' backyard and years later rented two more greenhouses while searching for a permanent location. In 1991, he ended up in Lewisville, Texas, with four acres that included a house and about 12,000 sq. ft. of indoor growing space for Steve's Leaves, a wholesale business that just added online retail this year. Steve is president and his wife, Tammy, is vice president and bookkeeper, as well as a dedicated fourth-grade teacher.

Steve's Leaves has one driver and four full-time propagators. "We do our own propagation from start to finish, mostly because there aren't sources for what we grow," says Steve. They grow more than 850 varieties of indoor tropical plants. The Rex begonia is one of the best sellers. Their begonia breeder has won two awards with his plants: the People's Choice Award and the Best New Introduction for Starry Nights.

Steve's Leaves sells 30 varieties of peperomia; 30 varieties of episcia, except African violets; pseuderanthemum; abutilon; the Hypoestes Splash series; maranta; small jewel orchids; variegated vanilla orchids and much more.

"I look for obscure, colorful and unusually textured plants," says Steve. He felt the same way in May 1990, when Julie A. Martens interviewed him for Under an Acre. "There is a market for unusual things," Steve said then. Today, he hears customers say, "I haven't seen that plant in 30 years," when they come upon a piggyback plant. The smell of Cuban oregano reminded another customer of a grandmother.

Other growers have tried to do what Steve is doing. “It’s very difficult to grow tropicals; competitors haven’t kept up the quality. It’s not a huge market and it takes a lot of knowledge,” says Steve. “If it’s a difficult plant, we won’t grow it. We tried growing one plant a half dozen times and failed.”

Steve’s Leaves began retailing its plants online to U.S. customers this year. “I talked about it for 10 years, so my son David set up a website. Our breeder developed the program and takes care of online orders,” says Steve. If a plant is not available at the time of the order, it can be custom-propagated and ready to ship in about three to four weeks.

Another of Steve’s hobbies from long ago has been fireworks. Three times a year he helped other companies with their shows for no charge. When Steve’s son, David, who is now 25, was old enough he came to the shows with Steve. Six years ago, David became president of Illumination Fireworks (Steve is vice president). “The company has grown a lot. We do July 4th, but we also do four shows a week year-round at corporate events, weddings and sporting events,” Steve says. “With my son’s leadership, he is growing the business and developing new markets using the fireworks displays, laser lights and CO2 effects.” Also, David lends a hand at Steve’s Leaves as a business consultant.

The similarity between fireworks and plants is evident. “Lots of fireworks effects are named after flowers: peony, palms and chrysanthemums,” he says. “I’ve liked fireworks and plants since I was young, and we’ve taken two seasonal businesses and made them successful, year-round businesses.”

**Word to the wise:**
“Don’t do what I do if you want to save money. We have a labor-intensive business, the plants are handcrafted and we have no mechanization. We’re very picky about what we use and don’t use as cuttings, which are first quality with no blemishes. We have no conveyor belts and in less than 12,000 sq. ft., we’re growing hundreds of varieties of three to five flats. We stop and start in order to tag; it’s very inefficient. We hand-water, although there is a spaghetti tube system in the hanging basket area, but [in the other areas] with the many varieties of plants, the watering requirements are different.”

But what makes this worth the effort for Steve is customers get excited over the plants that Steve’s Leaves grows. “People wait [at Steve’s Leaves retail customers’ locations]—sometimes two hours—for the truck to arrive with the delivery,” says Steve. They have plant groupies, Steve has been asked for his autograph and one woman couldn’t believe that Steve was displaying plants at a retail location. “Is it really you? I’ve been in love with you for so long,” she said.

> **Tips from Steve:**

- “Stick with what you’re good at.”
- “Grow things that others aren’t growing.”
- “We constantly look at sales and take things in and out of production.” **GT**

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