

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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### Opening Life's Next Chapter

*Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio*

In May 1974, Dave Hamlen was so eager to open his own business he skipped his college graduation. He knew as a sophomore at Vermont Technical College what he wanted to do, and it wasn't engineering as he had planned. He loved the business of greenhouses, horticulture, nurseries and landscaping, and consequently transferred to the University of Vermont.

On that day in May, when he could have been promenading with his UVM classmates to the "Pomp and Circumstance March," he was selling plants and nursery stock in his parents' driveway. There was no greenhouse at the time, so Dave purchased plants and placed them in and around the garage and the lawn, and offered his landscaping services.

"While I was at Randolph [Vermont Technical College], I worked for a nurseryman and helped with the trees and propagation. I felt that I had found myself," says Dave. A few years later, doing what he loved in his own business, Dave expanded his original space at his parents' property in Swanton, Vermont. In 1977, an area greenhouse owner retired. Dave took down the nine greenhouses, including two glass houses, and reassembled them on the field next to his parents' house. This was the home of Hamlen's Garden Center from 1978 to 2010.

"The property totaled 5 acres, but the greenhouse area was about 12,000 sq. ft.," says Dave. "We grew mostly annuals and some perennials and vegetables, sold hard goods and designed landscaping," he adds. At the busiest time, there were 20 employees. "In January, nearly everybody was off, except six key employees who worked year-round," says Dave.

His mother and stepfather, who had an enviable commute of 600 yards, did the transplanting. For Dave's blind stepfather, that meant transplanting by touch. "For them, it was activity and they loved it—the warmth and the smell," says Dave.

In 1980, Dave married his girlfriend, Anne. She became CFO and buyer, did the paperwork and worked in the store. They lived above the business until 1985 when they built a house a half-mile away.

Hamlen's had fall festivals, a petting zoo at Christmas and offered sleigh rides in the winter. Their customers came from the nearby area of St. Albans in Franklin County. Hamlen's sold mostly retail and some wholesale,

giving discounts to other greenhouses, garden centers and landscapers. They handled about 30 landscape jobs a year, primarily residential of which Dave says, “Seeing the finished product and the design executed with overall customer satisfaction was the reward.”

In September 1991, writer Julie A. Martens featured Dave and Anne in “Under an Acre.” On Dave’s wish list at the time was: “I want to increase fall sales to educate my customers that spring isn’t the only time for planting, and I’d also like to see some 29-hour days in the spring.”



*Dave Hamlen (above) recently sold his garden center business after his wife of 30 years passed away. Anne Hamlen (center) was the CFO and buyer for Hamlen’s Garden Center since she and Dave married in 1980.*

*After Dave Hamlen closed the garden center, Dave’s nephew Jeremy Ryan (right) and his wife Heavenly have turned Hamlen’s Garden Center into an e-commerce garden business.*

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The subject of retirement began to surface with Dave and Anne around 2005. “We didn’t dislike working, but it takes a lot of time having your own business. Everyone needs an exit strategy. You never want to wake up and find a dramatic change then say, ‘What am I going to do?’ I happened to be willing to let go and do with it what I wanted,” says Dave. “In talking to other business owners, they say, ‘I want to retire, but I’m not quite sure how to do it.’ Being forced to sell the business shouldn’t be the way; there should be a plan of where to go with the business.”

Dave’s life-changing moment occurred when Anne was diagnosed with cancer a few years later. Dave says she could teach everyone a lesson in persistence. “Her dedication to the business was so intense that even as sick as she was, she wanted to do payroll, so I carried her upstairs to the office,” says Dave. The next day Anne passed away. “She was strong; she was a wonderful woman—the love of my life,” he says.

Four months later Dave’s stepfather passed away at 95 years old, and five months after that, Dave’s mother passed away. “It was a lot to deal with at the time—plus selling the house and taking care of the business. Then an inner voice said it was time to take an early retirement and sell the business,” says Dave.

He closed Hamlen’s Garden Center in October 2010. The property was sold; it’s no longer a greenhouse, but that wasn’t the end of Hamlen’s Garden Center.

Dave’s nephew, Jeremy Ryan, was the webmaster at Hamlen’s. When Dave retired, Jeremy used his website

and marketing background to turn Hamlen's Garden Center into [www.hamlens.com](http://www.hamlens.com), an online garden center. Jeremy and his wife, Heavenly, are selling 565 non-nursery products online with a wholesaler in Ohio taking care of fulfillment. The top seller on the site is the Geo Global Partners waterfall pump.

In his retirement, Dave works three days a week in retail sales for a local nursery. "I can relate to the customers—I can tell them what to do and what not to do with the plants," he says.

Of his 36 years with Hamlen's Garden Center, Dave says, "It was a great run. It's a real rewarding type of work. You work hard, but something about it is easy—you enjoy what you're doing."

And on life: "It's an adventure. Things happen that are tragic, but you have to hold on to a positive attitude." **GT**