

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Behind the Business: Olympic Effort

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It's not often that a single product makes or breaks a company, but in the case of OHP, it happened twice: One product nearly brought it down, then another product brought tremendous success. The two products? Benomyl and Marathon.

Benomyl—also known as Benlate—is a key reason OHP was founded. In 1988, Ron Soldo, one of the owners of distributor EC Geiger, was approached by DuPont with an offer to distribute Benomyl exclusively to the greenhouse industry.

Ron liked the idea, but decided to form a new company for the task, since they would want to sell their products to Geiger's competitors. Ron launched the new firm as Olympic Chemical Company. Interestingly, it had no headquarters: All the field employees worked out of their homes, with administrative support provided by the EC Geiger office. "We were virtual before virtual was cool," says Terry Higgins, who was hired as general manager in 1992. "From day one our employees have worked from their home."

In the new company's portfolio: Olympic Benomyl, Joust, Grand Slam and Decathlon; plus a line of ULV sprayers, hand cleaners, defoaming agents and other greenhouse products. But Olympic Benomyl, a popular fungicide, was the star.

Until around 1990, that is. That's when growers who'd been using Benomyl started complaining of phytotoxicity problems on their crops. The problems were so widespread, DuPont issued a recall of the product in 1991, effectively putting Olympic out of the Benomyl business.

"That could have put Olympic Chemical out of business," Terry says. "Ron could have just closed the doors."

But he didn't, and for one primary reason: a new product on the horizon called Imidacloprid, a new granular broad-spectrum insecticide from Bayer. At the time, whiteflies were the scourge of poinsettia growers, with almost all products ineffective against them. Imidacloprid could be the answer to growers' prayers. In fact, Ron's selling point when he was hiring Terry was, "If we could get this product, it could make us a significant company."

Terry helped make that happen.

“When I came into the picture, I had a great relationship with Allen [Hawes, the Bayer executive in charge of the deal]. Allen committed to me that if I went to work for Olympic, he assured me we would have Imidacloprid upon registration.”

Registration was confirmed in June 1994. In July, Olympic (now called Olympic Horticultural Products at Terry’s suggestion) debuted Imidacloprid under the now-famous trade name Marathon. It was an immediate hit, Terry says. “Because if you remember, we were snowing whitefly. Whitefly was so heavy, it looked like snow in a greenhouse. Nothing was controlling them. Our booth was jammed with growers. It was truly a revolutionary product for whitefly and aphid control.”

So revolutionary, “Marathon” became a verb. Recalls Terry, “In the OFA Bulletin the year after Marathon was registered, a poinsettia production recommendation said, ‘When you Marathon your poinsettias.’ It wasn’t ‘When you treat your poinsettias with the first application of whitefly control ...’ . We all thought that was pretty cool.”

Marathon quickly became Olympic’s top seller, and even though Imidacloprid’s patent has expired, Marathon remains a top-five seller for the company.

What’s in a name?

Terry doesn’t know how Ron Soldo came up with the name “Olympic” and the use of the Olympic torch as a logo, but it did give them a nice theme for naming all their products—Marathon, Decathlon, Strike, Joust, Discus. Unfortunately, the United States Olympic Committee didn’t take kindly to the company using its trademark. Which is why the company now goes by the name OHP. **GT**