

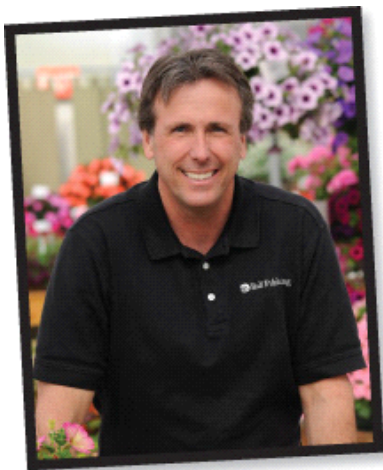
# GROWERTALKS

## Acres & Acres

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### Cheer up, Dale

*Chris Beytes*



**CHRIS BEYTES**

If you know Dale Buist, then you know I'm being facetious. I haven't known Dale long myself, but I get the sense you rarely see him in a bad mood. This guy exudes joie de vivre.

Although he probably can't spell it—he admitted to being a terrible speller. And to having a desk custom-made from deck lumber (“Everything I wanted and it cost me 100 bucks to build!”), which illustrates the range of topics Dale covered in a brief-but-fascinating interview on the occasion of an open house at his new \$7 million western Michigan garden center, Countryside Greenhouses of Allendale.

The main message I took away? That this self-proclaimed “uneducated farm boy” exhibits a wagonload of business savvy. He's blazing his own path to retail grower success, using Walmart as a model. He might just be on to something.

My first question for Dale: What's a guy thinking to invest that much money into a new garden center in this economy?

“That's a good question,” Dale replied with a smile. “This venture is stupid from a financial point of view. I'm 55, business long paid for, cash in the bank, no reason to take any risk. We can make more money than we need to [at the old location] for the rest of our lives.

“But I also look around and think, ‘I've got a lot of great people working for me. And if I'm going to call it quits at age 65, I'm going to start losing them.’”

I assumed he was also doing it for his sons Chris, Justin and Patrick, all of whom are partners in the new venture, but that's only partly right.

“I never raised my sons to come into this business,” Dale says. “That was never the plan when they were growing up. Never even gave them that as an option.”

But since when do kids listen? All three are owners in the business; Chris and Justin work there full-time, while Patrick still holds down a full-time job in IT (Justin's specialty, also). Dale is happy, of course, but still open-minded.

"They can stay, they can leave. Dad is the only one who has to stay," he quips.

I mentioned that earlier, Dale had compared the business to Walmart. That's odd for a retail grower.

"I was very offended the first time a sales rep came in and said, 'You are the Walmart of greenhouses,'" Dale answered. "But I started thinking about it, and he was kind of right. Our background comes from being a wholesale production facility. We serviced Meijer for 13 years and you have to produce a quality product at the right price in order to work for a large outfit like that. When we decided to leave them when scan-based trading came about, we came to the conclusion that we still had to grow a large volume at a very economical price and then pass that along to the customers. We're volume-oriented, price-oriented, but still keep the quality and the experience that customers will enjoy and continue to come back for.

"I'm just an uneducated farm boy, but that philosophy seems to work for us. I'm not saying it's for everybody or that everybody would understand it."

You take heat from competitors for lowering the market price?

"We get a little bit of blame for that," he admitted. "But I don't think we're wrong. I don't think we're ruining the market; I think we're foreseeing where the market is going. We're just headed there as quickly as we can get there, so we can turn a profit at tomorrow's prices. With that, customers will be able to continue to afford our product.

"If they can afford it and enjoy their visit and have fun, we're ensuring our future, not ruining it."

Speaking of fun, I like asking business owners if they're still having any. Some aren't. But I believe it's a key to success. I knew what Dale's answer would be.

"That's the goal," he replied. "I celebrate life every morning. I walk to work. And generally, if I'm lucky, I slept late enough to watch the sun coming up. Life is a gift and I'm here to maximize it." **GT**