

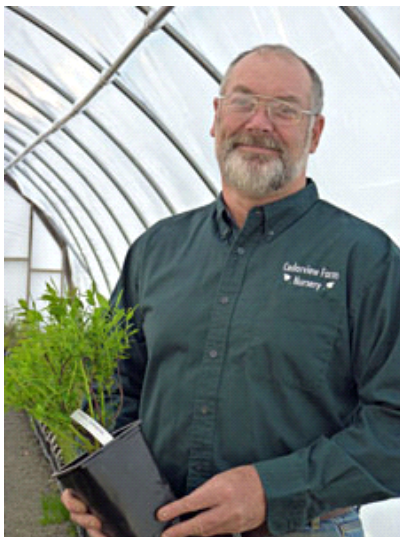
GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Learning by Being Different

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Being different from all the other kids doesn't work in middle school, but most adults don't have a problem with standing out, like John Saraphis, owner of Cedarview Farm Nursery in North Carolina. He and his wife, Rea, researched the industry to learn how they could be different from the others.

pictured: John Saraphis, owner of Cedarview Farm Nursery, offers his customers products they can't get anywhere else.

They struck on 2-qt. liners. "We trademarked Faster Finish Liners," says John. "As far as we know, we are the only growers of that size. We have seen a great demand for liners that can go directly to the field for lining out ... and can finish in a shorter time."

In 1981, John was a propagator of rooted cuttings. In two years, the focus of his business shifted toward landscaping and maintenance. When that business was sold in 2001, John continued to landscape until 2004 when he built their house, workshop and barn. Cedarview Farm Nursery, named for the 20- to 30-ft. cedars along their property, had its start in 2007.

John and Rea live and grow on 16 acres. Two and a half acres are in production: 6,000 sq. ft. for heated propagation, with 36,000 sq. ft. of gravel-covered beds and 12,000 sq. ft. of cold frames, which John plans to increase.

The first year they put in 35,000 plants and sold 20,000. It was a learning experience, John says.

"The water, the fertilizer—we did the fine-tuning—we changed the fertilizer and soil mixes," he adds. The second year they grew 45,000 plants and sold 30,000; the third year 79,000 to 80,000 were grown and every plant sold.

"The market has picked up in the last [few] years," says John. Recently, they grew 120,000 to 150,000 liners. "We could have sold 200,000."

John and Rea propagate and grow approximately 180 varieties of woody ornamentals, primarily flowering shrubs. As a wholesaler, John retained many of his clients from his landscaping and maintenance days. At a recent trade show in Baltimore, John picked up more clients. He says, "Being seen at shows regularly, people see an advantage to the size of the pot. No one grows a full 2-qt. pot and that was intentional on our end." Recently, Cedarview Farm Nursery became a licensed grower for LCN Selections, which adds 22 varieties to the 180 already grown by John and Rea.

Stem, North Carolina, is approximately 35 miles from Raleigh. "We are geographically located in a good spot. We have one truck that I drive. In one week I was in West Virginia; Wilmington, North Carolina; Maryland and Virginia," says John. "Our focus is to keep our existing customers by providing a great product and outstanding customer service, while growing our customer base in a manageable way."

The Cedarview customers are nurseries, landscape companies and garden centers on the east coast from Connecticut to Florida. "I've learned a lot from the landscape experience—to meet the customers' expectations, from the office to the appearance of the crew," says John. "We want our customers to gain the following benefits from using our plants: to quickly grow a finished plant, to enhance their cash flow by a faster turnover of plant material, to save money on fertilizer and chemicals, and to eliminate or reduce the space and labor required for in-house liner production."

"When I go to other nurseries or garden centers, I see how they [run their businesses] and I plan how I want to [run our business]," says John. Three items on his wish list: "I'd like a mechanical potting machine and I'd like to mix my own soil," he says. "And we're pretty sure that we can hire a driver next year."

Tips from John:

- "Become part of a trade association. They provide so much information on technical and business issues."
- "The very best thing about our industry is the people and many are willing to share information and provide help to others. If you're new to the nursery business, find and talk to an established nurseryman or woman. They have acquired their success and their wisdom through hard work and experimentation, and will be happy to share that knowledge with you."
- "Look at every day not as going out to work. If you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life; try to keep that attitude in 100 degrees or 5 degrees, pouring rain or when it hasn't rained. Love what you do and thank God every day. This is as close to being a farmer as you can get without being a farmer. It allows me not to worry about not having a vacation."
- "Use state extension agencies for the testing of water, soil and plant tissue for a minimal cost. They look at material, insects, the condition of leaves and nutrients. You can learn that you don't need to overwater or over-fertilize to get a better plant in a shorter time."
- "We employ an outside sales person who travels and likes driving, who works on commission and has an expertise in sales. He tells me what the market is demanding. He's a great resource because he talks to and sees so many people and buyers from Maine to North Carolina." **GT**