

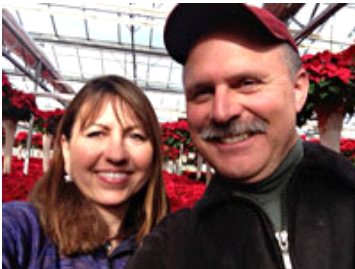
GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Making the Hard Way Easier

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It was during a trip to Kentucky that Liz and Erik Holmberg stopped by the Harland Sanders Café in Corbin. They remember the fried chicken, but it was “The Hard Way” that stayed with them. On the wall at the café is Sanders’ way of living his life and running his business: “... the easy way rests hazardously upon shifting sands, whereas the hard way builds solidly a foundation of confidence that cannot be swept away.”

Liz and Erik, owners of Nelson and Holmberg, Inc. and Lizzie’s Garden in Naperville, Illinois, like to use the words of “The Hard Way” to remind them of their focus. “Instead of taking the time, you sell something, but you haven’t taken care of the customer,” says Liz. “If you understand the customer, the hard way becomes the easy way.”

In 1922, Erik’s grandfather and a partner opened a wholesale greenhouse in Berwyn, Illinois. Erik’s father and mother took over the business, which was a large azalea grower. As soon as Erik was old enough he went into the business.

Liz began her career in the insurance business, but after she and Erik were married, she left the corporate world and worked with her mother-in-law in the greenhouse. “We knew the wholesale business wouldn’t survive without retail, so we had a six to eight-week garden shop that finished around Father’s Day,” says Liz.

In 1990, they moved the greenhouse to Naperville in order to expand the retail division. They’re on 20 acres and presently use six to seven of them. Lizzie’s Garden began in 1991.

“I painted a plywood sign and envisioned a logo. I didn’t know about plants, but I grew in my knowledge by learning from the family, going to trade shows, attending classes and Cornell University workshops,” says Liz. “I love botanical names. They melt in your mouth and they’re fun to say.”

She learned from the customers, too. “You’re going to learn if it comes out of your pocketbook. I like people and have empathy for them,” she says. In doing her research, Liz went to a number of greenhouses to see how to set up the store. “While I was at some of the greenhouses, I was ignored. If you’re sensitive, you’ll feel bad. I wouldn’t treat people like that. You have to have the right attitude,” she says. “It’s easy when you know

how.”

Liz makes sure her employees know the proper way to approach a customer. No one says, “What do you want?”

“I hire people who approach customers in dignified ways,” says Liz. “I’m training good employees. I make sure I’m out there and listening. I would be doing [the employees] a disservice if I didn’t call it to their attention. Our customers are impressed with our young people.” There are 16 full-time, year-round employees. During the busy season, the number can increase to 24.

Naperville, about 30 miles from Chicago, is a middle- to upper-class community. Liz says, “More females than males come in. We would like to encourage males to come in. One problem is that [the industry] markets too much to women; catalogs usually have women and kids on the cover. Why direct only to females? From my observation, men make wonderful customers. We need to nurture ourselves—men need to nurture themselves.”

The Nelson and Holmberg, Inc. wholesale customers are mostly florists, plus garden centers and various businesses. “We have delivery routes Monday to Friday throughout Chicago and Indiana,” says Liz. They have three trucks in their fleet and usually two are out on deliveries each day.

Lizzie’s Garden is open year-round, seven days a week. “We focus on plants and hardgoods like Quicor shepherd hooks and plant holders,” says Liz. Having the wholesale business helps the retail portion. “They play off each other,” says Liz. “Retail is better than the wholesale greenhouse at times.” While wholesale is 55% of the business and retail 45%, Liz says that retail is growing.

There are 60,000 sq. ft. under glass and 12 Quonset houses that equal 4,000 sq. ft. They grow seasonal blooming plants: Easter lilies, gloxinia, poinsettias, cyclamen (a big seller), bulbs, hanging baskets and 80,000 geraniums.

“We produce our own recipe called Lizzie’s Secret Soil. We started it as a joke, but it caught on,” says Liz. Their recipe for soil includes peat moss and sterilized soil that’s ground up. “We don’t take shortcuts.”

Spring is a big endeavor for the greenhouse. Liz says, “When Spring is here, I’m in good form. I eat well and get sleep. I’m focused on taking care of myself to give 110% to the business and to keep an even keel. I am conscious of the attitude I have.”

Erik takes care of the growing and management of the crops and pays the wholesale bills. Liz sells both retail and wholesale and pays the retail bills. When the busy season is over, Liz and her husband do take opportunities to travel. “We try to get around. Greenhouse people are so entrenched; it’s an injustice. You need to get out and recharge your batteries. If you work yourself to the bone, you’re not managing your business well,” says Liz.

“People are looking for something to make their lives better,” she adds. “You have to take each situation separately—I never want a customer to have a sour taste about us. I’ll try to make it better. To minimize

claims, have a superior product. People wouldn't feel right to make unjustified complaints. People have all kinds of things that happen. A woman came in and complained about the plants. It turned out that she was sad because her child left for college."

"Keep your eyes forward and do the best that you can. I've done a lot of soul searching. If you keep looking around, you'll never be the best you can be," says Liz.

Tips from Liz:

- "One needs to be detail-oriented. If a bill comes in with a different price than the originally-quoted price, say 28 cents versus 26 cents, it makes a difference."
- "If a discount is offered, pay the bill early. The savings add up throughout the year."
- "Limit point-of-purchase things. Focus on the fact that 'we have plants.' We brand because we have a strong identity. We use standard green pots with geraniums. It's a clean format. We make our own signs and don't try too hard. We don't go as far as blog-length, but are conversational on the signs."
- "Get out and meet people. You can't be shy. If you can't speak publically, go to Toastmasters. You have to like your customers. People want to be treated right. They will go somewhere else." **GT**

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