

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Wenke Buys Elzinga

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Hard times for one business often means opportunity for another, and that's the case in western Michigan, where Wenke Greenhouses has bought part of the assets of Elzinga Nursery. (*GrowerTalks* reported in late December that Mark Elzinga had dissolved his business, citing "losses suffered since the economic downturn began in 2008.")

President and majority shareholder (more on that in a minute) Lisa Wenke Ambrosio said in a phone interview that they have purchased the Elzinga & Hoeksema location known as "New Millennium." It's the one covered by the magazines (including *GrowerTalks*) for its geothermal, solar and wind power systems. Part of the facility was set up for organic growing. Did any of that have anything to do with their purchase decision?

"It's a very nice greenhouse," answered Lisa's uncle Dennis Wenke, Senior Advisor to the family business, who was in on the conference call. "[Mark Elzinga] spent a lot of money on what he would call the sustainability aspects of it, the solar panels, the geothermal wells, but quite frankly that was not a major factor in the decision to buy it."

So what was?

"We needed more space to produce more product," answered Lisa simply. "We were considering building, but this was a better alternative."

The Millennium location (they haven't chosen an official name, but that's how they refer to it) is about 12 acres, with 9 acres of useable growing area. That gives them almost 50 acres of growing capacity, including their Sunbelt location in Georgia (20 acres) and Kalamazoo, Michigan location (also 20 acres). The Millennium location is less than 10 miles away, for easy access.

Lisa says they'll dedicate their existing 30th Street facility to grow product for the garden centers and landscapers they service. Millennium will be used for growing product for the Kalamazoo Flower Group.

Dennis says changes to Millennium will be "minimal," with perhaps the addition of some transplanters or lights. He added that they probably won't do any organic growing, as Mark Elzinga had done. (Although Lisa says never say never.) "As far as the geothermal system, that will be a big feature for us," Lisa added.

Based on the expansion, business must be good.

“Business is difficult and exciting and changing ... I don’t know if I’d use the word good,” she answered with a laugh.

Adds Dennis, “When people spend a lot of money building a greenhouse and then go bankrupt, it’s impossible to duplicate what they spent and make any money, so therefore, it was very attractive at the price for the space that we got.”

Lisa says that as far as she knows, they were the only ones who submitted an offer on the greenhouse.

At the intro, I hinted at Lisa’s new title: As of January 1, she’d been promoted to President and majority shareholder of Wenke Greenhouses.

“That’s the technical side of it,” she says. “On the more practical side of it, we’re still working out what that means!” Lisa has been in the family business for 22 years.

Based on the Elzinga deal, and taking the reins of the family business, she must be confident in the industry if she’s banking her future on it?

Dennis cut in: “She’s not only banking her future on it, she’s banking her father’s and mine!”

Retorted Lisa, “I’m reminded of it every day!” **GT**