

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

11/26/2014

Growing One Plug at a Time

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Passionate for the outdoors, Vanessa Rutledge knew that her career wouldn't be at a desk. Her love of nature began young, inspired by her family—including her two sisters—when she spent her childhood either camping or just outside in general. In fact, Vanessa laughs that it was probably a high school job at a local law firm that cemented her career choice.

pictured: Vanessa and Ryan Rutledge, with their children Molly (left) and Addison, opened Vanroot Growers in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in December 2013 after buying it from the previous owners.



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"Every day it was sunny out I just wanted to call in sick," said Vanessa. "I figured out I needed a job that was outside in order to be happy in my life and to be able to make a living."

With a Purdue University degree in horticultural production and marketing, Vanessa started to work in the greenhouse industry. Ryan Rutledge, Vanessa's husband, has a slightly different story because he grew up in the industry, developing a love for the horticulture business. He began by watering at his father's nursery and then worked at his landscape company. For Ryan, growing seemed to be in his genes.

Ryan and Vanessa continued to learn about the world of growing, working in Minnesota at Bailey Nurseries, moving to Chicago to work for a landscape firm and then eventually returning back to Fort Wayne, Indiana, their hometown. Little did they know that this move would not only bring them closer to their family, but also to the next step in their career—owning their own business.

The two started out in Fort Wayne by working at Ryan's father's landscape business for a few years and then at a local nursery. With a love for the outdoors, Vanessa was in her element. And then she was approached with the opportunity to work at a greenhouse—a career move that would change Vanessa's perception of the greenhouse industry.

Due to her limited experience at Purdue, Vanessa was hesitant about working in a greenhouse, but she decided to give it a try. She was shocked to discover that she loved this environment.

“It’s more controlled. There are a lot of different varieties, which means you have to know a lot more information. It’s more of a challenge,” said Vanessa. “You are in charge of that crop from a teeny little plug until the end.”

Vanessa discovered how paying attention to small things, like pH and fertilizer, could make a huge difference in the crops. There was pride in bringing these plants to life and Vanessa knew that this was a career path that she wanted to pursue.

Opportunities kept knocking on Vanessa’s door, and in 2008, she was offered a position at an established wholesale greenhouse in Fort Wayne. Ryan came to join Vanessa just a year later and the two worked together, learning the ins and outs of the business. In December 2013, when the business went up for sale, Vanessa and Ryan decided to make it their own.

And so, just over a year ago, Vanroot Growers was born. The name was a creative amalgamation of “Van” (from Vanessa) and “root” (Ryan’s high school nickname due to his life in plants). The Rutledges are slowly changing the original business model, with the purpose of spreading out the cash flow throughout the year. In the first year, they added more perennials and nursery stock with the hope of making Vanroot Growers a one-stop shop for landscapers. With a strong business plan in place, the Rutledges surpassed their goals, doubling their income in both shrubs and nursery stock.

With 13 greenhouses, the family provides a three-season business from pansies to poinsettias. In the winter months, the greenhouses are used to store tropical plants (both their own and their customers) and perennials. Parts of the 12 acres are used for fields where the Rutledges grow their mums and flowering kale. When choosing next year’s stock, Vanessa considers both their landscape customers preference and purchase history. This helps ensure the products that the Rutledge family invests in growing will be sold.

“Landscapers are our main customers. No local huge retail stores. We have little stores, mom and pop places,” said Vanessa. “[They] will buy about three months of the year and we work with [them] in purchasing plug trays, usually three to four trays of each variety.”

Meeting the needs of their customers is one of the secrets of the Rutledges’ success. During the holiday season, the Rutledges’ clients shift from landscapers to churches and fundraisers.

“It’s wonderful. They usually take the poinsettias after the first week of Thanksgiving, so you don’t have to sit on the inventory,” said Vanessa. “It allows us to break down the greenhouse and get it winterized earlier.”

In the midst of poinsettia season again, the Rutledges reflect on the past year. “The season was fast and furious: Mother’s Day hit and everything was gone by the second week of June,” said Vanessa.

Overall, they’ve discovered the hard, rewarding work with owning their own business—the growing pains of working with boilers and well pumps to the gratefulness of supportive family and friends. When asked about how it impacts their personal relationship, Vanessa laughed and said, “There’s an old adage: If you work

together, you can live together.” And this is one family who works well together.

Vanessa’s recommendations for starting your own greenhouse:

1. Make sure it’s something you really love doing. It’s like a marriage.
2. Create a really good rapport with your future customers. Communication is key!
3. Assemble a good network of people to help—for example an accountant, attorney and a banker. **GT**

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