

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Filling Their Shoes

Vic Turkot

*“Who’s gonna fill their shoes?
Who’s gonna walk that tall?
Who’s gonna play the Opry
and the Wabash Cannonball?”*

In 1985, legendary country singer George Jones, noting the rapid aging and demise of many mainstream country stars, sang “Who’s Gonna Fill Their Shoes”—a song that posed the question: Who was going to replace the likes of Conway Twitty, Roy Acuff, Waylon and Willie, Elvis, Charlie Rich, Jerry Lee, Carl Perkins and more?

If ol’ George was around today and saw the current situation of many South Jersey growers, he might be tempted to sing a similar tune.

It was in the late 1970s and early ‘80s when a whole new crop of plant growers took root in this semi-rural region. Greenhouses were popping up everywhere. Camden County, Gloucester County, Burlington County and Salem County were suddenly hotbeds of hanging baskets, mums, poinsettias, flats and Easter plants. Recognizing the coming boom in house and outdoor plants, the new growers, mostly in their late 20s and early 30s—men with with agricultural backgrounds—started putting up hoop houses. And more hoop houses. And then more sturdy houses. And they kept on growing, literally and figuratively. Now, 40-some years later, they’re still at it, but not getting any younger.

No heir apparent

If you do the math, you find most of these growers are now closer to Social Security than to social media. The whole generation of growers is rapidly approaching their Golden Years. Most are medium-sized, mom-and-pop operations and one gradually became supersized.



Tim Powell of Powell's Greenhouses in Mickelton is a perfect example. Tim and his wife Peggy are still going strong with no imminent thoughts of retirement. Tim is an energetic man of 65 who easily looks and acts 10 years younger. But he knows quite well there will come a day when it's time to say enough. Tim and Peggy don't have children, so there will be no heirs to fill their shoes.

Pictured: Tim and Peggy Powell of Powell's Greenhouses in Mickelton are still going strong, but they know there will come a day when it's time to retire. However, Tim and Peggy don't have children, so there won't be a chance of family members taking over the

business

Tim grew up helping out on a farm of 2,500 leased acres. He knew that wouldn't be his future, but some kind of agricultural occupation would be. He went to Delaware Valley College, a school known for its agricultural curriculum. After graduating, he found a job with a man who had greenhouses and liked what he saw. He ended up buying a horse farm of 21 acres and put up a greenhouse in 1971. Now it's 45 years later. Countless 80-hour weeks, constant worries of weather, pests, fuel costs and all that go with the business, and he still has his passion for growing.

"It's not a job," he says, "it's a lifestyle.

"I never wanted kids; I never considered myself a parenting type," Tim laughs. "But now I wonder if maybe I should have had a son. One who wanted to go to ag school, work hard and take over down the line." But the chances of that happening would be very slim he acknowledges. "Kids don't want to work that hard anymore."

Tim sees his future going one of two ways: selling the business or selling the land for houses. He would prefer the former. His greenhouses are in a very desirable location and Tim shouldn't have too much trouble selling for houses. His heart and head are in conflict.

"I'd hate to see all this disappear; all the time and effort I've put into it," said Tim. "But who's going to buy it? I don't see many potential buyers out there."

Taking things as they come

A similar sentiment is expressed by Bill Zielke of Zielke's Greenhouses in Williamstown. He doesn't know of anyone out there who's willing to put in the time, effort and money to keep a greenhouse going.

"Farming is in your blood or it isn't," he says. "It would be hard to find a guy who is capable of growing and running a greenhouse and has the money to put into it."

Bill, who works side by side with his wife Jean, raises crops of poinsettias, bulbs, annuals, mums, hydrangeas, flats, hanging baskets and novelty containers for Easter and Mother's Day.



Bill has a son and daughter—both who opted not to take over his business when he's ready to hang it up. His son worked side by side with Bill for a couple of years, but decided the business was not for him. Bill is now 68 years young and plans to keep going until he's at least 70, "as long as my health is adequate," he jokes. "Maybe longer. I've seen many guys retire and don't know what to do with themselves. I don't want to be one of them."

Pictured: Bill and Jean Zielke of Zielke's Greenhouses in Williamstown have a son and daughter, but both opted not to take over the business when their parents are ready to retire.

Bill started his current operation in 1982 after five years of working in the business with his ex-father-in-law. His log cabin house sits at the front of his 11-acre spread, the grounds scented with the smell of wood smoke wafting from the wood-burning furnaces he uses to generate heat for his greenhouses. He calls his occupation "food for the soul." Asked what he expects his place to look like five years from now, he responds, "I don't look that far ahead. I just take things as they come." Bill's ground isn't as much in demand as Powell's and selling for houses may not be as strong an option.

Keeping it going

Down in Salem County, Jim Frey, owner of Sunset Farms, is also still sailing along at age 65. Jim started his business in 1988. Unlike many of the other growers, Jim didn't come from an agricultural background. He was a high voltage electrician for Amtrak. He bought 100 acres in a very rural part of Salem County, almost on a whim. Ground was cheap.



"Once I bought the ground, I had to figure out what to do with it," he laughs. First he grew soybeans and sweet corn, then added mums. Then someone asked if he could grow bedding plants, so he put up his first greenhouse. Now, the corn and soybeans are a distant memory. Jim currently grows upwards of 165,000 mums annually, along with bedding plants, hanging baskets and other annuals.

Pictured: Jim Frey, owner of Sunset Farms in Salem County, is still going strong at age 65. He has two sons, and both have worked with him in the past, but they moved on to other endeavors. Jim sees himself keeping on with the business for at least another six years. Jim has two sons, Pete (38) and Tim (39). Both worked with Jim in the past, but have moved on to other endeavors. Jim sees himself keeping on for at least another six years.

"I took out a 10-year loan for solar panels four years ago," he states. "And I want to keep growing until I get that loan paid off. And I might keep going. I like to keep busy."

He holds some hopes for son Pete to possibly take over down the line. Pete moved into the landscape field and is still around the greenhouses quite a bit.

"I'm thinking he might get tired of all the physical work from the landscaping and move over to here. But that'd be a bit down the road," said Tim. As far as his real estate potential, his property is in a very rural location and may not be in much demand.

What, me retire?

George Lucas of Lucas Greenhouses in Monroeville may leave big shoes to fill. Let's say Size 24 EEEE. They say you can tell how busy a pizza parlor is by the number of ovens they have working. For a greenhouse, it's the number of golf carts. George, age 59, has more golf carts than some large golf courses—72 at last count. His lunchroom for his 120 full time and 80 to 100 seasonal workers has 30 microwaves sitting on the counters. His well-fed workers help produce some 400,000 hanging baskets a year, 400,000 9-in. mums and volumes of bulbs, container plants and cuttings. Finished products make up 60% of his volume, with his cuttings and pre-finished material comprising the rest. His warehouse has 10 loading docks to pack up the trucks he has going all over the country. At last count, George has 1,200,000 sq. ft. under glass.

George started his own business in 1978 at age 21 after working in a greenhouse a few miles from the 200-acre farm where he grew up. His reason for leaving his first greenhouse job? "I wanted to expand the business, the owner didn't," George explains. So he put up his own houses and still hasn't stopped yet.

George has no intentions of retiring in the near future, distant future or possibly ever.

"I like what I do. This is my dream, my passion. I'm always going to be involved in some capacity," he says confidently. One of the reasons for his confidence is his family. Son Nate (24) is being groomed to take over the business some day. His wife Louise and daughters Corey and Lacey are also heavily involved.

As far as selling his business, if it ever came to that, George sees no problem.

"Our houses were planned for efficiency, to get maximum potential out of our space." His equipment is totally on the cutting edge and he has many outlets for his products. He believes there would be a buyer out there for him somewhere, but that decision may rest on the shoulders of Nate way down the road.

Taking the reins

One son who has taken over for his father is Joe "Jobie" Galczynski Jr. of Wenonah Greenhouses in Wenonah, a scenic Victorian town in Gloucester County. Jobie, 49, had been working with his dad since he was 12. He knew what he was in for and he was up to the challenge of continuing the business. Before going to work full time, he attended Delaware Valley College and majored in horticulture with a minor in business. Once he got his degree, he started right back in. Though his dad, Joe Sr., still shows up everyday, Jobie was officially handed the reins in 1990 and became the third generation of Galczynskis to run the business.

"It's a passion," he says proudly. "Sometimes I forget that I have a job." But Joe might be the last of his line.

Jobie has two sons and two daughters, but no one has shown an interest in becoming the fourth generation of growers. "I think, I'll be the last one here," he states. "But if they try the real world and don't like it, they can always come home here." Jobie has 4 acres sitting in a prime residential area and should have no problem selling the real estate if it comes to that.

Other options

If there are potential candidates out there to take over the business, where would you look? One place might be Delaware Valley University in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, which has a renowned agricultural curriculum.

Christopher Tipping, Dean of the Agricultural Program, has many students ready to go into the growing field. Chris says he sees a lot of interest in the fields of hydroponics and aquaponics—more so than growing mums and hanging baskets and the like. However, he says, “I have three freshmen who have a desire to have a nursery.”

All of the students at Del Val, as it’s called, are required to do internships in related fields for two summers. And “almost all of our graduates have two or three job offers waiting, mostly with big organizations,” he says proudly. “They like the job stability, higher salaries and lesser hours that a large corporation can offer.”

Penny Papaioannou, a business broker with Tannebaum & Milask in Marlton, New Jersey, has never seen someone come into her office looking to buy a greenhouse business. Or sell one. Penny says no matter what type of business, most kids don’t want to take over for their parents.

“They see how hard their parents worked and suffered and they don’t want to do it,” she said. “They want to get an education, work 40 hours and have weekends off.”

Her advice for selling the business? “Clean up your books and clean up your business,” she says bluntly. “Make sure your books will hold up under scrutiny. Cash flow is the key—[buyers] want to know how much money they can make. Make sure the appearance of the business is up to snuff. That it looks successful, not tired and worn down and dated. It’s like selling a house; clean it up.”

Planning ahead is also crucial, she says. “Seventy percent of small business owners don’t plan ahead when it comes to selling their business,” said Penny. She recommends that business owners should start as much as five years ahead when they decide they’re going to sell the business. “You don’t want to wait too late, until you are forced to sell the business due to health or other reasons. Put your house in order in advance,” she said.

But the question still remains, “Who’s gonna fill their shoes?” Every grower is going to have a different answer. **GT**

Vic Turkot has been in the flower and garden center business since 1979. Vic and his wife Cindy run Freshest Flowers in Haddon Heights, New Jersey. They’re not sure who’s going to fill their shoes.