

# GROWERTALKS

## Cover Story

9/30/2015

## No Risk, No Reward

*Jennifer Zurko*



Jared and Jordan Dekker are fearless. They jump into every opportunity with both feet. Or four feet, in their case.

But don't assume that they're reckless. They make very smart business decisions and crunch the numbers before taking on a new customer or looking at another facility.

Jared and Jordan are 30-year-old identical twins from Hudsonville, Michigan—a hot bed of horticulture in the Midwest, with large big box growers all around them, some of which also happen to be the Dekkers' customers. Jared and Jordan contract grow for four well-respected wholesale operations around Grand Rapids. And for them, it works.

### A winning work ethic

When Jared and Jordan were 13, they started working at a local greenhouse—not because they loved plants, but because their parents encouraged them to get jobs. You may think this is a bit young for them to be pushed out of the nest, but it introduced them to horticulture and instilled in them an appreciation for hard work.

This job also flipped another switch—one that helped build the drive to continue looking toward the future. When the twins were 18 years old, they bought 25 acres of land and leased it for the first three years while they were attending Michigan State University, Jared for Horticulture and Jordan for Crop & Soil Science.

During this time, Jared was also working at Sawyer Nursery, eventually working his way up to head grower, while Jordan worked and helped manage a turf grass company. The idea to branch out on their own and become contract growers came from Jared while working at Sawyer Nursery, as he saw the need and demand for more growing space. In 2008, they bought their first greenhouse in Hudsonville—a newer, but run-down, facility that needed a lot of repairs. But Jared and Jordan got to work fixing it up, while adding more structures to it. Since then, they've acquired five different locations totaling six acres, two locations owned and three leased. The goal is to expand the original facility they bought in Port Sheldon and let their leases on the ones they don't own eventually run out.

## Risk takers

At first, they were just growing perennials for Sawyer, but then the brothers had the bright idea of contacting the other wholesale growers in the area to see if they needed some help. In this part of Michigan, where there's a lot of horticulture, it was easy. It didn't take long for them to prove to the bigger guys that they can pull their weight when it comes to quality and delivering on time.

"It's a unique situation because we have our hand in everything we do," said Jordan.

"But that's how we like it," Jared finishes. "We're not afraid to ask questions and ask for help on how we can provide our customers with a better product."

Still, it's a risky business because Jared and Jordan don't bring in their own supplies—all of it is bought in bulk from their customers. And since most of their agreements end with a handshake instead of a written contract, it has the potential to make for a sticky situation if the plants don't sell (remember—these are big box growers who use pay-by-scan). But Jordan just shrugs and says, "No risk, no reward."

And, so far, the rewards have been coming in leaps and bounds—Jared and Jordan are on track for another record year and are having a great season, which also includes their 200-acre farm where they grow zucchini and other finished produce during the late summer and fall.

"We're passionate about farming and don't like to sit still," said Jared. "We can't let grass grow under our feet."

## A passion for plants

This was the fourth year of growing annuals for the Dekker Brothers, bringing their ratio to about 80% perennials and 20% spring annuals. They don't grow mums or poinsettias (that's field crop time), but they're one of the largest producers of Hens & Chicks in the country through Sawyer Nursery.

They run their five locations pretty lean—with a "mobile" crew of 11 full-time people that travel to all five locations, along with a potting machine and all of their equipment. This same crew keeps busy until the winter, helping out with the field-grown produce.



---

*This was the fourth year the Dekker Brothers grew annuals—mostly combinations and hanging baskets*

---

And when they need to upgrade their facilities, they find a way to include modern technology. When Jared and Jordan were looking for a climate-control system for the Port Sheldon location, they were having a hard time finding exactly what they wanted, so they asked a local engineer who knows the greenhouse business to custom-make a computerized control system that was intuitive and easy to operate—but also operate everything in the greenhouse—that's wireless and can be controlled from their smartphones.

They both agree that keeping up with technology is important and that outweighs the high cost of investing in new machinery or climate control systems—something that they've noticed their predecessors don't often do.

"[You have to] think outside of the box," said Jordan. "We embrace technology. We also embrace the smaller margins that we operate on. It all adds up in the end, and at the end of the day, we are very blessed and fortunate to be where we are today."

## In it together

Many businesses in our industry are family-run and/or multi-generational operations, so the Dekker Brothers can certainly relate to some of the challenges that come with working with your relations. Jared and Jordan admitted they sometimes butt heads on issues like shipping and employees, and they always work it out. But they don't have the luxury of learning from older family members—they're a first-generation business that's pretty much started from nothing.

"We love working together. We're both on the same page most of the time," said Jared.

And the next page in the Dekker Brothers book? Hops. In their spare time, besides spending time with their wives and young children, they both enjoy bow hunting and craft beer, so raising hops is something they've talked about adding to their plans. It seems that regardless of what Jared and Jordan do in the future, their work ethic and passion will help them continue to be successful.

"We refuse to fail," said Jordan. "We'll be here 40 years from now. It's not about the money; it's about the pure passion." **GT**