

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

12/31/2015

The Pride & Hard Work of Four Generations

Anne-Marie Hardie



For anyone who's had experience working in a family business, it's far from simple. Successfully working together requires finding that delicate balance between business and personal. Part of the fourth generation of growers, Chris Schwartz is well aware of this challenge. Today, he not only works alongside his father, Dave, but his cousin, Josh, uncle, Ron, and grandmother, Donna, at Schwartz's Greenhouse in Romulus,

Michigan.

"We have been family-owned from the beginning," says Chris. "We put our lives into our operation and give it that extra attention that may not be there with a larger operation."

Pictured: Schwartz's Greenhouse in Romulus, Michigan, is run by four generations of Schwartz's—Josh, Ron, Dave and Chris.

For Chris, the decision to follow in the family footsteps didn't come automatically. In fact, when he was 16, he left the industry with ambitions of pursuing a desk job. A Michigan State graduate, he tried working in an office for four years. But he soon learned that his heart remained with his family business.

"It draws you back," says Chris. "I worked in an office for a few years after college, [but] the grass is always greener on the other side until you get to the other side. This industry is addicting." That was eight years ago.

When asked what it was like to work with family, and in particular, his own father, Chris admits that it's not always easy.

“When I first started it was very challenging. We both thought we knew the best way to do it,” says Chris. Over time, both father and son have not only learned to work together, but have come to appreciate, respect and value the other’s ideas. “I’m closer to my dad now than I’ve ever been in my life,” Chris says. “He expects perfection, and sometimes there are differing views, but our relationship has never been better.”

It’s this push for perfection that’s been one of the main differentiators between Schwartz’s Greenhouse and their competitors.

Pride and perfection in every plant

The journey of Schwartz’s Greenhouse began when Chris’ great-grandfather Henry Schwartz began growing vegetables in his backyard and then proceeded to sell them to his neighbors. However, his entrepreneurial spirit didn’t allow him to stop there; Henry expanded his offerings to a thriving vegetable, and eventually, bedding plant business.

Over the years the business continued to grow, adding more greenhouses and poinsettias to address the Christmas market. As the next generation stepped in, Henry’s son, Ralph began to look at the opportunities in the wholesale market. One of their initial wholesale customers was Frank’s Nursery and Crafts, beginning with poinsettias and eventually expanding to include bedding plants.

“The major growth of the wholesale business began with Frank’s with sales to all 15 locations,” says Chris. The 12-acre operation that made up Schwartz’s Greenhouse shifted to mainly wholesale. However, the opportunity in retail never strayed very far from the Schwartz family’s mind.

The involvement of the third generation, Ralph’s two sons, Ron and Dave, saw another change in the business. The two cousins predicted the downfall of Frank’s Nursery and Crafts, and encouraged the family to return to retail.

“My dad and uncle saw the writing on the wall for their wholesale bedding plant industry,” says Chris. “And so they begin making the shift back into the retail market.” Their foresight enabled them to be able to cope when Frank’s shut their doors, suffering only a minor financial loss.

Today, Schwartz’s Greenhouse continues to grow the majority of their bedding plants and poinsettias in-house. Retail remains their primary market, with approximately 3% of their product being sold wholesale.

Their primary goal is to provide their customers the best value for the product—not aiming to be either the cheapest or most expensive in the industry. It’s this focus on value that has maintained loyal customers and built the brand. This commitment to a high-quality product is the key to their success—a belief that’s been proudly passed down through each generation.

“That’s the neat thing about our business—you can have that differentiation. You can go to Walmart or a grocery store to buy a Coke and it’s the same thing,” says Chris. “But in our industry, a petunia is not just a petunia. There will be a great difference depending on where you purchase it.”

Their most demanding customers are the plants themselves, and the Schwartz family tries to give them

whatever they need.

“The four of us are very hands-on and take pride in what we have built and wish to continue to build,” says Chris. The introduction of the fourth generation, Chris and Josh, has meant new changes to their processes. In fact, the two cousins have been actively working on increasing both business efficiencies and overall profitability.

One area that they initially focused on was shifting the public perception of reduced spring pricing. Their goal was to get a better margin for their products—something that they’ve happily been able to achieve.

“We used to almost train our customers to wait until June 1 to come and buy our product, as we would lower the prices immediately on June 1,” says Chris. The two cousins took a deeper look at these “spring reduction” phenomena, trying out some innovative ways to shift this perception.

The process began with adjusting their 12-in. basket spring production numbers from 5,000 baskets to 4,000. This simple reduction allowed them to sell the majority of their 12-in. baskets by June 4. Now when the date approached, instead of reducing prices of their 12-in. baskets, they introduced a new product—a 10-in. hanger. This shift in focus allowed Schwarz’s Greenhouse to provide a reduced priced product for that “deal hunter” in June, while not frustrating that early shopper with severe price reductions later in the season.

Chris and Josh will continue to look “out-of-the-box” for solutions, while their fathers, Ron and Dave, will ensure that pride and hard work is an integral part of the business. It’s this wonderful balance of philosophies that has made Schwarz’s Greenhouse the success that it is today. **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.