

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

3/31/2016

Personality Goes A Long Way

Jennifer Zurko

If you've ever seen one of their entertaining Christmas videos or visited their website and saw the photo on their Contact Us page, you know that Van Belle Nursery is a fun company.

But don't be fooled into thinking that it's all fun and games in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Since Bill and Grace Van Belle started the company in the early 1970s, their mission has been to "find a better way," creating solutions for their customers, who today include wholesalers, big boxes and IGCs.



Pictured: Their new RocketLiners are grown in a tray made by a local Abbotsford company that's strong enough for Marketing Specialist Kevin Cramer to stand on. That's DeVonne Friesen, Van Belle's VP of Business Development, showing it off.

While visiting growers in BC, I stopped by Van Belle and got a tour of the company's multiple facilities from DeVonne Friesen, VP of Business Development, and Kevin Cramer, Marketing Specialist. Van Belle's specialty is flowering shrub liners that are shipped all over North America, but they also grow annuals and perennials, and mixed containers for what they call the "retail ready" market. The liner and retail-ready businesses are treated separately because "different customers have different needs," said DeVonne, so they have dedicated teams to handle each market, with some crossover in sales and marketing.



Pictured: Five acres of new greenhouses have been built as Van Belle's now fourth facility in Abbotsford, British Columbia, which used to be an old blueberry farm. And there's room to grow in the future if necessary.

When I visited in early March, Van Belle was putting the finishing touches on their fourth facility. All four of them are in Abbotsford and are differentiated by the street or area they're on. The new one (called Page Creek because said creek runs through the back of the property) is on 20 acres across from their original location. It was an old blueberry farm where Van Belle has built 5 acres of new Westbrook greenhouses, which are 21-ft. to the gutter. Here, they'll grow mostly perennials.

Their motto of "finding a better way" allows them to research and invest in new systems and technologies. They've implemented Lean Flow in their transplanting, packing and shipping areas to be more efficient and to help keep track of the 300-plus shrub varieties they grow. They were the first nursery to use rice hulls in their growing media to keep the weeds away and help with drainage (the plants are finished outside in a climate that tends to be a rainy one). And they've developed a "very involved IPM program," DeVonne explained, because there are fewer pesticide and herbicide options in Canada.

Van Belle is very excited about its new product that was unveiled at MANTS in January—RocketLiners. Entirely designed and researched by Van Belle employees for more than four years, they took their classic 4-in. liner and made it bigger and better, developing a special tray that's not only sturdy enough to stand on (seriously!), but provides better drainage and a healthier root system. DeVonne and Kevin said that about 80% of their products are grown as RocketLiners; by 2017, it will be 100%.

They stressed the importance of the trialing, which included testing the RocketLiners with their own finished container business unit. "We knew that if it didn't work for us, it wouldn't work for our customers," stated DeVonne.

The trays, which feature deep side channels to help with drainage, are made by a local company right there in Abbotsford. And since they're so sturdy, DeVonne said they sterilize and reuse them, so they should have a lifespan of a minimum of 10 years.

As far as their lighthearted company culture goes, it comes down to the right people, said DeVonne. Bill and Grace's son, Dave, is Van Belle's current president, and it's his fresh, positive and high-energy attitude that has nurtured the company's fun personality.

"Dave built a team of people that are like-minded," DeVonne said. "It's not an easy industry to be in—there are long hours, lots of hard work, it's stressful; there are things that are out of your control, like the weather.

But we think, if we're going to be here, let's enjoy it!" **GT**