

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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From Science Geek to Plant Nerd

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Nestled in Columbus, Ohio, is a local growing operation unlike any other. A walk through the nursery is a journey of discovery, unveiling succulents, annuals and perennials that inspire youth and seniors alike to get growing. Creating his own horticulture career, owner Jared Hughes is choosing to sell and grow only plants that he's passionate about.

Pictured: After 10 years nurturing his love of plants, Jared Hughes and his wife Liz turned Groovy Plants from one experimental greenhouse to a thriving operation.



As far back as he can remember, Jared has had a passion for science, from the budding childhood dream of being a veterinarian to the eventual discovery of his love for horticulture. His curiosity about the natural world drove him to explore several pathways, from science teacher to pursuing his naturalist degree.

“During my naturalist degree, I took a whole year of miscellaneous biology courses,” says Jared. “That’s how I became familiar with Latin and I realized that my brain seems to be wired for learning this language.”

While in college, Jared began working at Foertmeyer & Sons Greenhouse located in Delaware, Ohio, to help pay for his education and to provide hands-on experience with horticulture. The owner, Mark Foertmeyer, took Jared under his wing, fostering his passion for science and plants in particular.

“The course work and on-the-job experience were really cumulative, and before I knew it, I was learning about plant material,” says Jared. “It wasn’t that I didn’t like plant material before, I just didn’t realize how much I could like it.”

Not wanting to limit his job options to parks and recreation, Jared decided to pursue a second degree at Columbus State where he enrolled in the landscape architecture and design associate's program. Throughout this process, he once again confirmed that it was the plants that continued to pique his interest. At the age of 19, Jared made a leap and decided to purchase a rack of succulents from Mark to explore growing—and growing succulents in particular.

“I saw pieces of these plants fall off the rack and they would root into gravel,” says Jared. “I made the decision to teach myself propagation and how to grow plants from seed.”

To further explore plant propagation, Jared built his first greenhouse on his parents' property. Little did he know that this small greenhouse would mark the beginning of his future career into the world of succulents. Just 10 years later, Groovy Plants has expanded from one experimental greenhouse to a thriving operation.

A self-professed plant nerd, Jared continues to grow plants that foster his passion, focusing on specialty succulents, perennials and annuals that are both harder to find and time sensitive. These are plants that cannot easily be acquired through traditional suppliers and, in turn, offer a diversity of unusual things that will garner attention. A grower at heart, Jared avidly delves into all aspects from watching the plants flourish to hybridizing new breeds.

“I love growing things that capture individuals' imagination,” says Jared. “I don't have any interest in growing what everybody else is growing.”

Today, Jared grows upwards of 25,000 4-in. succulents while also launching a retail store location this spring with his wife Liz. Throughout the discovery process, the Foertmeyer family has been very supportive, encouraging Jared to pursue his interest, along with managing their business.

“It's always been about my love for plants,” says Jared. “I liked succulents before they were a big deal. They are pretty amazing plants. “

Liz shares his love for plants while also having a natural affinity for Latin. Understanding Latin is critical for their operation, as many of the unusual plants that they grow don't have a common name.

“She has inspired me a lot and has pushed me to go further into my breeding efforts,” says Jared.

In order to pursue his own business further, Jared made the decision to leave Foertmeyer & Sons. This year marks the purchase of new property that will enable them to have both a retail location while also expanding their wholesale operation. Surrounded by trees, their new location includes seven polyhouses, a historic school house and the Hughes family home. This spring will be the grand opening of their retail location with the hopes of bringing their local community together to listen to bluegrass music and explore the world of succulents.

Wanting to entice a broader audience, Groovy Plants announced their grand opening on Facebook. The response has been phenomenal. Within two days, 2,000 people shared that they were interested in the event

and 250 people confirmed that they'll attend. The majority of the individuals interested are young woman between the ages of 25 and 45.

Jared lends his current marketing success to his passion about the products and the uniqueness of the garden center.

"If you look at who is buying succulents, it tends to be the younger generation. (Succulents) are easy to grow, they are low input, they are relatively cheap," says Jared. "It gives them something that they can have in their home that they don't have to take care of constantly. It takes the fear factor out of it."

Groovy Plants' business motto will continue to revolve around the plants. Although he's excited about venturing into the world of retail, the stable network of wholesale customers allows the flexibility for liquidating product and managing the overall market.

For the future, Jared strives to remain true to his passion, continuing to grow unique and interesting plants at a size that he can maintain.

His dream is to create a plant store like no other.

"I'm following a model a lot of people would be terrified to do," says Jared. "I just want to sell plants, that's it. It's like the restaurant that only has one sandwich, but it's the best sandwich in the world." **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.