

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

12/30/2016

Manufacturing to Microgreens

Anne-Marie Hardie



For close to 30 years, John Bolton diligently worked in the manufacturing field. Growing was a hobby; something that he liked to do during his off time at his large property in Hilton, New York. He never dreamed of leaving his long-term career to operate his own business. However, his life was about to go through a dramatic change.

It was 2008—during the recession—and the firm that John worked at had made the business decision to relocate abroad, leaving thousands jobless. In his 50s, John had to decide whether he wanted to continue with the company and work abroad in either Mexico or China or find a new career. Uncertain about what his next career would be, John made the decision to leave the company and take the severance package.

Pictured: John Bolton completely changed careers in order to start a hydroponic farm outside of Rochester, New York.

The inspiration for his somewhat dramatic career change came while driving through Toronto back to Rochester.

“I noticed that all of these greenhouses had sprung up since my last visit over eight years ago,” said John. “And I thought, ‘Wow, here is an industry that is expanding while all manufacturing in the U.S. is being exported.’”

Curious, John began to research the possibility of starting a growing operation on his own property. His initial research revealed that the competition with small traditional operations was steep and required substantial resources and equipment to support it. Hydroponics, on the other hand, was still fairly new to the Rochester area. Perhaps the largest selling factor for John was that soilless growing had the potential for fast and frequent year-round production.

"I wanted to make sure that I maximized my sales and hydroponics appeared to be the best business to invest in," said John.

Not one to sit around, John put together a business plan, took his severance and invested into his future. For additional security, he also leveraged his house and property, literally putting all that he had into this new venture. The next winter, he designed the greenhouse structure with a colleague and began to build. For additional insulation, he made the decision to install radiant floors, providing a comfortable surface to work in and additional warmth for the cold winter months. This was 2009, one of the snowiest winters in decades, but the snow did not hinder the progress of the new company.

A bumpy start

Word of mouth of the project spread, resulting in Bolton Farms landing a major sauce maker account almost immediately after opening.

"They basically guaranteed that they would buy every leaf that we would grow. So, in addition to microgreens that we were growing at the time, in that first year, we produced 15,000 square feet of basil," said John.

However, one week after the initial delivery, the sauce company decided to move to the east shore of Maryland. Shortly after opening, he had to decide whether it was worth the risk of losing a major account or if the company should make a further investment and purchase the equipment to transport the basil to Maryland. Wanting to retain his client, John made the decision to buy an efficient vehicle that would end up transporting 600 lbs. of basil twice a week to Maryland.

But the challenges for Bolton Farms didn't stop there. That fall, downy mildew attacked the basil crops, resulting in a major loss for the company.

"We had to shut down the entire facility for disinfection and we lost that account," said John. The same issue re-occurred in the spring, with Bolton Farms quickly learning the importance of diversification.

A business model focused on diversification

Today, Bolton Farms grows 15 varieties of crops, including watercress, arugula, kale and several types of herbs. Approximately 70% of their produce is sold to restaurant clients, while the excess retails through three local farmers markets.

"The majority of the sales continues to result from word of mouth," said John. "One of the top restaurants in Rochester uses our products and I'm proud to say that we now have a restaurant waiting list."

It's been an extremely successful business model, shared John, with the farmers markets being a great venue for education, community connections and to sell the excess produce. In fact, one of their largest farmers markets takes place at a local hospital as part of an initiative for both employees and students to have access to fresh market produce.

A pesticide-free grower, the future for Bolton Farms continues to be a bright one, with each year demonstrating a consistent growth of 15%. Education has been one of their best tools to help share the health and quality of hydroponic growing, and in turn, increase the demand.

“With hydroponics, you have less disease and pests,” said John. “While at the same time, consumers began to recognize the benefits of being able to consume produce picked the same day.”

Overall, John admits that the shift from manufacturing to growing was not a simple one. In fact, there were periods during the first three years that most business owners would have given up. However, John was committed, both financially and emotionally, to the success of the business.

“I worked 24 hours, seven-days-a-week, and had to really learn to multitask,” said John. “I’m a significant risk taker; the odds were against me succeeding, but my perseverance kept me in the game and we eventually got better at what we did.”

Today, John operates Bolton Farms with a small team of eight individuals, which helps balance both the growing and sales aspect of the business. Plans for the future include continuing to grow the hydroponic side of the business, while also researching the potential of growing some of the soil-based produce to further fulfill the needs of his growing clientele. **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.