

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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NORM (and Dana and Tal) on NORM

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I thought we'd try something different with our most recent visit: We brought Norm copies of those five previous cover stories and asked him to select a few highlights and comment on what he was thinking and doing back in the day. We asked his two kids and business partners, daughter, Dana Doyle and son, Tal, to weigh in, too. The conversation often drifted down side roads as we talked then vs. now. It made for an interesting ramble through the history of the family business.

In Norm's comfortably cluttered office, I handed out copies of the articles he'd been featured in over the years. Norm first picked up the June 1979 cover story titled "Six Ideas," in which Vic Ball wrote about ideas from six different growers.



Vic featured Norm for selling flats of annuals for \$6—the highest wholesale price Vic had seen. That was for an 11 x 22 tray with eight 6-count packs. But Norm told Vic that he was considering switching to a 3- or 4-count pack, 12 per tray. That would lower the cost per pack to the retailer from 75 cents to 50 cents while keeping the total plant count per tray at 48.

Norm skimmed down to the end and read aloud:

Our retail customers seem to want a better-quality plant. They seem willing to accept fewer plants and get better quality—within reason.

"That's when I went down in the number of plants per flat," he commented to us.

"That trend has continued to where they now want a 4 1/2 in. or 6 in.," Dana pointed out. "They do want something bigger. They don't want to start with a little baby plug anymore. Not necessarily that it's equated to quality, it's that they don't want to wait. Instant gratification. They want it now."

Dana then read from the September 1974 issue, when Norm was on the cover as "Bedding Plant Grower of

the Month.” Under the subhead “What’s Booming?” Dana noticed this quote from her dad:

We’re sold out of ivy geraniums—grew 1,100 of them. All 10 in., \$5 wholesale.

“Five dollars wholesale, our geranium basket. That’s about what we get now!” she exclaimed. “Five dollars for a 10-in. ivy geranium hanging basket.”

“It’s probably \$5.95 or \$6,” Tal corrected.

“Of course, your production costs have gone down since then,” I joked.

Tal laughed, then pointed out that some factors had eased production costs somewhat.

“I think when you start looking at some of the advances that have occurred, [such as by getting products from offshore], you know, that’s been extremely helpful. And advances in being able to get the numbers [of cuttings we need], that’s been very helpful. But as far as costs, no, they continue to increase.”

Next, Norm brought up the article from May 1975, titled “Changes Brewing at Norm White’s, Norfolk.”

“That’s when I decided to stop disbudding,” he recalled. Then he laughed. “And it took 10 years for me to really decide!”

“Were you still center-budding then, Dad?” Dana asked. “You kept center-budding for a while, right?”

“Well, I did a little bit of that. But this was ... I grew a crop and didn’t do any disbudding at all and ... ” (he read further) ... “I talked about center disbudding here, too.”

In the 1975 story, Vic wrote about an experiment Norm had done in which he grew the pot mum variety Yellow Mandalay three different ways: disbudded (removing all the side buds and leaving the center bud), taking just the center bud and leaving all the buds. Vic wrote:

They were in full flower the day we called. Result: Striking! The center-bud removal plants simply made more show, of course had more flowers.

Vic continued that Norm was planning on doing center-bud removal on his entire Easter and Mother’s Day crop the next year, but a follow-up interview revealed that he hadn’t because the plants take an extra week to finish and that would have thrown off his year-round mum schedule. So he stuck with disbudding.

“We only disbud one crop a year now and that’s our Chinese New Year mums,” commented Dana.

Norm had shown me those during our greenhouse tour: deep 7-in. pots with eight cuttings each. Disbudded, they were going to make for big, spectacular pot mums. They were growing 15,000 total, most of which will be going to Costco. (Chinese New Year is Saturday, January 28).

I asked the group, “Do you think you could show those Chinese New Year mums to a customer who has never seen a big, spectacular pot mum and maybe get their attention?”

“We try,” Tal answered. “But you start looking at the retail [price]. A club-format [store] is going to run a 20% or less margin. That’s very different than a supermarket that may be running a 50% [margin]. So if you have something for \$15, one can sell it for \$19.99 and another is going to be selling it for \$29.99 ... it creeps out of the acceptable [price] for consumers.”

“Can you deal with the sort of boutique retailer that’s only going to take a dozen at a time?” I asked.

“There’s no way to get to them,” Tal replied. “You could look at a UPS type of situation, but even with that it’s \$30 per box.”

Through Norm’s office window, I could see the back of his car and its vanity plate, “Mr. Mum.”

I asked, “When did you shift from bedding to potted plants and wind up becoming Mr. Mum, Norm?”



Pictured: Norm's daughter, Dana; son, Tal; and Tal's wife, Sheri. Mom Hetty, Norm's wife of more than 60 years, passed away in January of 2016. Says Tal, “When Dana and I got together and started talking about our photo we re-called our mom's dedication to the success of the business [she was a 50% owner and worked in the business from the late '50s onward] and the HUGE role she played supporting all of us (but never front-and-center).” And while Sheri didn't sit in on our interview, Tal insisted she be included in the photo. “A light bulb went off and Dana and I realized what a contribution my wife, Sheri, has made, and we instinctively knew she needed to be there with us.”

“That happened in the '60s,” he answered. “And I guess if you really go back and think about it, probably Tom Lavagetto had a lot to do with it. He was the buyer here locally for a supermarket chain [Giant Open Air Market], which only had about seven or eight stores. I was already doing mums for the wholesalers—there were three wholesalers in town I was dealing with. I didn’t sell to the florists; I let the wholesalers do the job.

“When Lavagetto came in and wanted to buy my mums, I said, ‘You’ve got to get them through a wholesaler.’ Which he did. And then the wholesaler started selling all the new stuff, the pretty stuff, to the florists and giving him the leftovers, and he didn’t like that, so he decided I needed to sell direct to him. So I did. About that time the wholesalers said, ‘If you go direct to the supermarket, we’re going to stop buying from you.’ That was a big decision I had to make—in a couple of hours.”

He says he talked it over with his wife, Hetty, and they decided potted plants to the supermarkets was the way to go.

Knowing how challenging the supermarket potted plant business is today, I quipped, “Was that mistake

No. 1?”

They all laughed, but then Norm got serious. “It really wasn’t a mistake. It was the best thing we could probably do at the time. I told the wholesaler—and he was a bigwig wholesaler ... known all over the country—I told him, ‘I’m not a farmer anymore, I’m a businessman.’ He didn’t like that (laughs), so he stopped doing business with us.”

But then Norm did admit to one possible mistake: Not recognizing the importance of the home improvement chains.

“The supermarket business was really growing and I couldn’t grow enough for supermarkets. We did have Home Depot and some of these places come in and talk to us and want to buy plants, and I said, ‘I don’t have enough space to do business with you.’ I think that was probably a mistake at the time because who could have thought they were going to take over the world? I didn’t. I really didn’t.”

“But you’ve gotten into that market by contract growing and selling to Bell Nursery and other growers who do serve that market,” I pointed out.

“Well, that’s the only way we’re into them now,” Norm replied, “but we could have been a Bell, if we’d have done it right early on.”

Dana agreed. “We should have kept with growing more bedding and expanding the bedding side of the business from the beginning because it’s what’s growing now. Consumers don’t really understand indoor potted blooming. They don’t get it. So much is telling them ‘garden.’ They don’t think about taking a pot mum or a calla or something into their house to enjoy. They think everything has to go in the garden.”

Tad chimed in. “Yes, we can get in there now [to the DIY chains], but the challenge is that it’s a 20% or 30% decrease [in price] over what we would be paid. And who would have known pay by scan and all those things would have come through as well.”

“In other words, you might have done really well for the first 10 years, but now be so deep into them ...?” I asked.

“Right. We try to have as many market channels as we can, so it’s not a potato famine if we have a problem with one. But still, even there, you get into a market channel, then they want more of it or more of you.”

“And what about potted plants as gifts?” I ask. “Where are consumers with that?”

“I think they pick up the \$3.98 cut flowers,” Dana answered. “[Cut flowers] are more gifts than potted anymore. There’s a disconnect with just enjoying a potted plant in your house.”

Then Dana followed up on another line of thought. “One of the things in those articles that probably we have to know now is, every retailer we sell to, we have to know what margins they work on. Dad didn’t have to know all

that; he didn't care. 'This is the price of my plant. Take it or leave it.'

Norm: "No, I talked about that in there."

"You said, 'This is my price.'"

"I talked about the margins, that some of them were taking 100% and somebody else was taking 50%."

"Right," Dana acknowledged. "So ... every single person we sell to we have to know their margins because we have to understand why a product didn't work in that outlet. 'Well, because you priced your pot mum at \$16.99 when a pot mum every other place is \$7.99. That probably is why your sales were not there.'"

"[Dad] made suggestions—'Well, I think you'd sell more if you didn't charge this'—but every single person we deal with, we have to know why something didn't sell for them. And it's always based on price."

"Basically, that's what I did with this one supermarket," Norm commented. "I'd call them three times a week to find out what they had less of. If they had 10 flats of tomatoes left, I didn't send them tomatoes the next time. I sent them things they didn't have."

Since we'd spent so much time looking backwards, I asked Tal and Dana where the emphasis is today. Tal replied, "It's looking at who we sell to and that's the end consumer. The end consumer right now for us is the Millennial." He mentioned Dana's Millennial, her 31-year-old son, who moved out of the house at age 29.

"He's a focus group of one?" I asked.

Tal laughs. "He was on the six-year college plan and he had loans from that. Then he had to get into his career—he's a police officer. And he didn't move out of the house until he was 29."

"Until he had a job and could support himself," Dana clarified.

"He's the leading edge of the Millennials," Tal continues. "Then we have the [large population] hump. Household formation is what is going to create the next boom in our industry. We're waiting ... there's this long, pregnant pause."

"You're waiting for them to hit 35, to enter that 35 to 55 demographic?" I asked.

"And that may be 40 for them," Tal said.

He talked for a bit about tracking their shopping habits, such as diaper sales. If diaper sales are up, can gardening be far behind?

"I know that our [product] isn't something they necessarily have to have, but I have never met any couple where, when they get married, they don't say, 'We've got to do something with the yard.' Now, whether that's just putting grass down or putting one container out, they're going to do something because that's what they're supposed to do."

I asked if he thought Millennials would consume our garden products in the way previous generations did or if we'd have to develop new products and new ways to sell them.

"Historically, yeah, they're going to be different," he replied. "I mean, they're not the '50s kids, right? They're not the kids who were buying" He turned to his dad. "What did you sell in the beginning? You wrapped stuff up in newspaper?"

"That was pansies."

"So yes, technology changed. Somebody came up with packs. So, of course, they're going to buy differently because our technology is changing, our technology of growing, our technology of production ... "

"But they didn't come from that era of the Victory Garden, either," Dana pointed out. "You still have people who don't know where things come from."

"What about organics, food safety, locally grown?" I asked. "These are trends that seem to bode well for our industry."

"I think that, from listening to my son, locally grown is more interesting to them than organic," Dana answered, "Because normally, organic is so much more expensive and they're still on limited budgets."

"They won't spend on our products in the beginning (they're buying shoes for their kids), but I don't think the Baby Boomers did, either." **GT**



Norm's five covers. Note that Vic used the 1974 image in 1979. They were frugal back then!