

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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From Truck to Tractor

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Making the decision to get into the greenhouse industry isn't one to be taken lightly. For the Schipper family, the journey began 18 years ago, when John Schipper, a trucker who hauled grain, made a stop at a farm that was growing greenhouse peppers and tomatoes. John immediately became interested in the potential opportunity in growing and went home with plans to build a 1,500-sq. ft. greenhouse structure on his property.

His wife, Suzanne, who was pregnant with their sixth child, launched herself into the opportunity, chatting to neighbors and local businesses about its viability as a family business.

Pictured: John and Suzanne Schipper opened Hilltop Greenhouses in Monarch, Alberta, while their family of 12 children and several grandchildren grew.



"During our research, we received lots of advice from people," said Suzanne. "One of the main ones being, that if you've never grown before, do not start off with peppers."

Taking this advice to heart, the Schipper family experimented with bedding plants first, starting them from both seed and rooted liner. It was the winter of 1999. John spent the season building the greenhouse structure, while Suzanne began to grow plants in a grow table in their home. Once the structure was complete, the Schippers transferred the plants to the greenhouse and prepared themselves for their first season in retail. That spring, with a newborn baby on Suzanne's hip, the Schipper family opened Hilltop Greenhouses in Monarch, Alberta, Canada, selling bedding plants, including alyssum, geraniums, tomatoes and marigolds to their local community.

For John, the transition from trucker to grower wasn't an immediate one. With a growing family, John knew he had to continue in his trucking business until the sales from Hilltop Greenhouses could provide enough to sustain both their family and the needs of a growing business.

However, it didn't take long to see that this business was a perfect fit for their family. That first season was extremely successful; in fact, the plants literally outgrew the small space. To accommodate for the growth, John built another structure, increasing the retail space to 3,000 sq. ft.

"That spring, our sales doubled from the previous year," said John. "And so, we continued to expand."

With five years of a successful operation under their belt, the family was comfortable with putting all of their resources into Hilltop Greenhouses.

"In 2003, I sold the truck. It was frustrating being on the road for 12 to 18 hours a day and missing out on both the business and my family," said John.

News about this family-owned business continues to spread throughout the local communities.

"When we first started, there were quite a few aging mom-and-pop shops around," said Suzanne. "Today, there are very few; we don't have a mom-and-pop operation within 31 miles."

There are the box store competitors, but Suzanne shared that they don't really look at those locations as competitors, as they can't meet the personal service that Hilltop Greenhouse provides.

The Schipper family also continued to grow—today, John and Suzanne are proud parents of 12 children and several grandchildren.

"A lot of customers still remember me with a baby on a hip," said Suzanne. "Now it's grandchildren and they are sometimes on my hip, too."

Almost 15 years later, John has had zero regrets about leaving the trucking business. In fact, he shared that he loves the adrenaline of the sale season, and the growing needs of the business have kept him busy during the off season.

"There is always something to do—whether putting up another structure, sprucing up the place or adding new floors to the building," said John. In fact, they're currently growing out of two locations.

Passionate about automation, John spends the off season looking at ways to maximize productivity.

"We have spray booms and Echos for hanging baskets. It helps with labor, especially since I'm currently doing all of the watering for both locations," said John.

Hilltop Greenhouses has established itself as the go-to location for bedding plants, with 70% of the retailer's income coming in between Mother's Day and the end of May.

"People come in for our unique hanging basket and container garden recipes," said Suzanne. "Customers love our customized baskets; they get an original planter that they can proudly display at their home."

Two years ago, the family added a rustic theme to the building, including a store front and furniture.

“Everybody now comments on how wonderful the place smells,” said Suzanne. “The minute you walk in it’s lots of colors and plants, so you get an immediate wow.”

For customers who want to plant their own, Hilltop Greenhouses offers workshops, including miniature gardens in the early spring and a “plant it up” workshop once the warmer weather arrives.

“We will also store the planter here until the planter is ready to go outside,” said Suzanne. In the winter, Suzanne makes winter container house calls, using the pots that the customers had made for spring and adapting it to a winter theme, including greenery, ribbon and artificial berries.

Passionate about both the plants and the needs of their customers, Hilltop Greenhouses strives to provide customized and personalized service. Each year they bring back the tried-and-true plants, but also add in something new for those customers who are looking for something unique. This year’s focus has been on Canada’s 150th birthday, shared Suzanne, so when she wasn’t sure which color to choose, she opted for red or white.

When asked about plans for the future, John shared that at 30,000 sq. ft., they’re currently maxed out for their retail space. The options are either increase the size, go wholesale, sell year-round or simply remain as is. At the moment, Suzanne and John aren’t looking at shifting their business practice. In fact, they’re incredibly happy with where their business is today and are looking forward to a new year of sales, and connecting with both the customers and their plants. **GT**

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