

GROWERTALKS

Features

8/31/2017

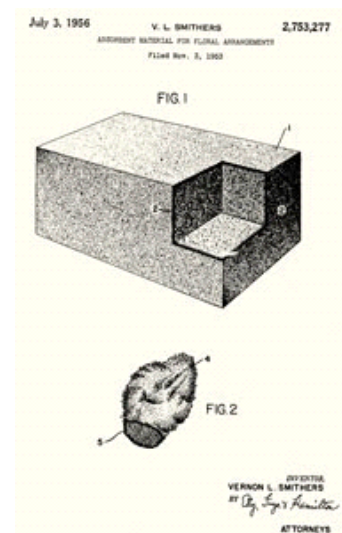
Behind the Business: The Unwanted Foam Known as Oasis

Chris Beytes

Vernon Lewis (V.L) Smithers may have been the original namesake of Smithers -Oasis, but he had no idea that he was going to revolutionize both the floral and greenhouse industries when he bought the rights to an unusual rigid foam that two other companies had given up on.

But let's back up just a bit, to the early 1950s in Akron, Ohio, where V.L., a chemist, plied his trade at his own independent testing lab, V.L. Smithers Laboratories. He did work for the city's burgeoning tire and battery industries (Goodyear, Firestone, General Tire and other major automotive suppliers called Akron home).

Pictured: Patent for "absorbent material for floral arrangements" filed in 1953 and granted in 1956.



One of V.L.'s customers, Union Carbide, had developed an unusual rigid foam product that was lightweight and crushable. The problem was they didn't know what to do with the stuff. Nor did another firm to whom they sold the molds and equipment. But V.L. was intrigued and, having a long desire to get into manufacturing of something, he purchased the equipment and rights to the foam, determined to find a use for it.

Now, how flowers come into the equation isn't quite clear—perhaps V.L. was a romantic and regularly gave his wife, Helene, bouquets. All we know is, on one occasion, he was looking at a flower arrangement he'd given her and he had a eureka moment.

"If I could find a way to get water into the foam, perhaps it would be used as a base for floral arrangements," he thought. (Before floral foam, florists used chicken wire, newspaper and other common items to support cut flowers.)

After some experiments, he developed a formulation of his foam that would hold 95% water, allowing cut

flowers to be supported and hydrated at the same time. In 1953, at the age of 64, V.L. filed for a patent and set up his first production facility in Kent, Ohio.

The second defining moment for Smithers-Oasis came two decades later, in the mid-1970s. Oasis Floral Foam is widely embraced by the floral trade and is doing well, and, while V.L. passed away in 1973, his sons have taken over the business, expanding production to Canada and Denmark to handle the international demand.



Pictured: V.L. Smithers (seated) with his sons Robert, William and Ted.

In looking for new markets, they created a grower division and were offering new formulations of Oasis foam for hydroponic growing and also for rooting plants. But acceptance of these new “rooting blocks” was “hit and miss,” recalls Bill Riffey, today’s managing director of Oasis Grower Americas.

However, there was a close connection between Smithers’ employee Charlie Walton (who eventually went on to purchase the company from the family) and Paul Ecke Jr., the famous California poinsettia propagator, says Bill. Paul Ecke was looking for a better way to root and ship poinsettia cuttings, which at the time were propagated in heavy, wet soil. A lightweight foam product would reduce shipping costs. Plus, they’d be uniform and inert, increasing consistency. Paul and Charlie worked together to develop the first Rootcubes, that later evolved into the Rootcubes Wedge, which today are used on a wide range of annual, perennial and woody ornamental crops.

“That was a defining moment, when foam and poinsettia propagation became synonymous,” says Bill. “That’s where the [grower] business really started to take off.”

V.L.’s passing in 1973 meant that he never saw his company’s Rootcubes product become as important to the growers as his floral foam had been to florists. But his impact wasn’t lost on the industry. He was posthumously awarded the Leland T. Kintzele Distinguished Service Award by WFFSA, the Wholesale Florist & Florist Suppliers Association, in 1985. In 1987, he was inducted into SAF’s Floriculture Hall of Fame. And in 1998, V.L. was profiled in a special exhibit at the National Inventors Hall of Fame—fitting praise for the man who found a use—many uses, in fact—for the unwanted foam that he dubbed “Oasis.” **GT**