

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Staying Up with the Downturn

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There are few businesses that can state they weren't impacted by the 2008 Recession. Garden centers and landscapers were particularly hit hard, as their offerings were often deemed as a luxury. For Wiregrass Region native Bobby Boone, it was the Recession that refined his business philosophy and made Buds N' Blossoms Nursery into what it is today. This challenging period developed resiliency amongst the owners, but even more than that,

it forced the business to focus on the critical elements that ensured that Buds N' Blossoms not only survived, but thrived.

When asked about how the journey began, Bobby was quick to emphasize that the story of Buds N' Blossoms is as much a story of he and his wife Rhoda than anything else.

"We learned by making mistakes," said Bobby. "Looking back at the past 43 years, I now know more what not to do than what to do."

Buds N' Blossoms opened its doors in 1973, when Rhoda's father Emory Solomon opened a small garden center slightly north of Dothan, Alabama. Rhoda had recently graduated from Troy State University with an art degree and was employed as a school teacher, while Bobby, who had graduated with a psychology degree, had begun to work at a nuclear plant. The couple hadn't even considered the field of horticulture.

However, when Emory opened his new business, they became curious about this budding industry. It didn't take long before Rhoda made the decision to leave teaching to assist her father with his business. Bobby followed shortly thereafter.

"We literally started out not knowing the difference between an azalea and a camellia," said Bobby. The couple immersed themselves in the business and learned not only what worked, but more importantly, what didn't work for them. This included extending the business to include, and eventually focus on, landscaping.



It was a chance meeting with a local commercial construction company that awakened Bobby and Rhoda to the possibilities in landscaping.

"He was building a retirement home and he wanted a quote for a full landscape job, including trees and sod," said Bobby. "It was a \$40,000 job."

A new door had opened for Buds N' Blossoms. Rhoda and Bobby began learning everything that they could about landscaping, including taking courses at the University of Georgia.

"It was these design classes that allowed our presentation and landscaping to go off the roof," said Bobby. "Our designs were simply easier to sell to the customer."

One of the surprise benefits of venturing into landscaping was that Rhoda was able to apply her artistic talent to developing creative designs.

"She has such a touch with designs," said Bobby. "When I first look at them, I often wonder her motivation, but the end result looks so pretty."

Pictured: Bobby and Rhoda Boone, owners of Buds N' Blossoms Nursery in Dothan, Alabama.

Within each of her designs, Rhoda marries her knowledge of textures and colors with her plant knowledge, truly bringing the landscape to life.

Today, their landscaping portfolio consists of 70% residential clients and 30% commercial. Although there's still a retail storefront, Bobby said most of their time is invested in developing their landscape division. Bobby's role within the operation is more of a hands-on approach, ensuring each job is done and done well, while Rhoda is the person that Bobby turns towards to help come to a solution for any major decision or challenge.

"I've been blessed with an incredible mate," said Bobby. "She is the best business person and is loved by everyone. She is the brains and grace that runs this operation."

However, their operation wasn't without any stumbling blocks. In fact, when the recession occurred, they were uncertain of whether there would be a future. Recognizing the challenges that were facing them, the couple took strategic measures to ensure that not only their business would be their tomorrow, but that each of their 25 employees would still have a job.

"We took it one minute at a time, one day at a time," said Bobby. "We survived the economy tanking and now there are only bright days ahead."

The shift in economy did force the couple to make some dramatic actions, including taking jobs at cost to ensure that the business could continue to thrive.

"It forced me to be a good nurseryman, to better serve my customers and learn the numbers inside and out," said Bobby. In fact, Bobby said that he truly wasn't confident in his business ability until after they survived the recession.

After 43 years in the industry, horticulture for the Boones truly feels like a blessing. Buds N' Blossom isn't a business that's stayed stagnant, but instead continues to evolve with the times.

"Our expectations have increased for both ourselves and our employees; it's what has made our business thrive

despite the challenging times,” said Bobby.

Their son, John David Boone (known as J.D.), has taken a slightly different path, choosing to focus on growing his own garden center, Dothan Nurseries just down the road from Buds N’ Blossom.

“After seeing the stress involved in landscaping, J.D. decided not to do that; instead he focused on building his own garden center,” said Bobby.

Extremely detail-oriented, Bobby shared that the nursery business fits J.D. like a glove.

“The garden center is a different animal all together,” said Bobby. “You have to be passionate and dedicated to survive. That is what J.D. is—he invests so much time in the details and delivers exceptional products and service to his customers.”

With retirement on their mind, Bobby and Rhoda are thankful that they have a couple of key employees who could successfully take over the reins.

“I trust them with my life; they are smart, but there are so many important little things that I want to share with them,” said Bobby. This realization truly came to light when he started imparting knowledge to his friends and colleagues, Derek Dobson and Antonio Martinez, who they’re hoping will eventually take over the reins of the business.

“I never realized that I knew so much as when I began to try to transfer my knowledge to someone else,” said Bobby. However, Bobby knows that both he and Rhoda will be there to guide them throughout their journey.

For the past 40 years, Bobby and Rhoda Boone evolved the homes of Dothan, Alabama, and its surrounding area one plant at a time. Despite the hardships, or perhaps because of them, they were destined for life as landscapers.

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