

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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From Big Box to IGC

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The two gentlemen in red are Johannes Pieterse (“JP”) and Brent Troost, the new owners of Countryside Flower Shop, Nursery and Garden Center of Crystal Lake, Illinois. With them are the long-time (47 years) former owners Richard and Lori Harmes, from whom they bought the suburban Chicago IGC last year.



You don't know it, but you've met JP before, on the cover of our June 2019 issue as a typical (but anonymous) grower tracking his costs. For the shoot, we traveled to JP and Brent's then-employer, ColorPoint (formerly Mid-American Growers), where we took a quick tour and then set up the cover shot you see.

What JP and Brent didn't tell us at the time was that ColorPoint had been sold to a Canadian cannabis firm and the greenhouses were being filled with cannabis plants. They purposely kept us away from that area and we were clueless until the press release came out a few weeks later.

So imagine our surprise when JP and Brent next showed up as the new owners of one of our favorite local garden centers!

It turns out the former general manager and head grower weren't comfortable swapping the variety, color and excitement of growing bedding plants for the mundane, monoculture world of cannabis. Over their morning coffee they would talk about what else they might do. Contract growing has small margins. And they didn't have the financing to build a mass market-sized greenhouse operation.

Then they looked at a retail-grower operation that was for sale in Michigan. They didn't like that particular deal, but the grower-retailer concept was eye-opening. Could they find an operation that fit them?

They did: Countryside. JP dropped by at least once a month, as a customer, to get a feel for the business. They met Richard and Lori (and their partner James Riedl) in February 2020, began negotiations in March and took ownership September 15—yes, during the pandemic. What was that like?

"Fantastic!" answered Brent. "If you have a drive for something you want, you'd better strive to achieve that goal. That was a big hurdle to jump—especially to get an SBA loan in the middle of a pandemic."

"We were convinced when we walked in here for the first time that this company was doing well," added JP. "And, of course, the pandemic did a lot of good things for that. But also, no weddings anymore. And there were a lot of things that didn't go well. But now we're all getting used to the pandemic and how to handle it."

What do they bring from their large greenhouse background? Growing skills, efficiency, industry know-how and sourcing relationships. JP has already used his background in Dutch rose growing to source cut roses, while Brent will add IPM and biological controls to their 1.5-acre production greenhouse (located in nearby Woodstock). They even bought a pot filler from ColorPoint to boost efficiency and flexibility.

To get to know their customers (and vice versa), they deliver flowers on the weekends, visit landscape customers to shake hands, and make deliveries to funeral homes and churches.

"We're humble and just helping out with the team," said JP. "Put us to work, no problem, tell us what to do! At Christmastime, we were making wreaths in the Elf House. Fantastic! And the employees see that we are not too lazy to help out."

As for their long-range goals for Countryside?

"We want to be more of a destination garden center," answered Brent. "People come out here and spend literally an hour or an hour and a half just wandering around. We want to have something more than just plant material. Are we talking a band and food? No, not necessarily. But something that differentiates us from the rest of the crowd."

"With a little bit of the European mindset," chimed in JP. "When you see what a garden center is in Europe, I have that idea in mind."

It's not quite a European café, but two vending machines were being installed during our visit. They'll add benches, too, so folks can relax and enjoy the surroundings.

"For us, it's building on our name," said JP. "We're sitting on a 32-acre plot, so there is enough room for expansion. There's enough room for whatever craziness comes up!" **GT**