

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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In Memoriam: Russell Weiss

Chris Beytes



It's sad to lose anyone in the industry, but when an icon like Russell Weiss passes, it almost feels like the end of an era. And perhaps it is. Russell, the patriarch of the well-known Kurt Weiss Greenhouses of Center Moriches, New York, passed away June 15 surrounded by his friends and family. He was 84.

Pictured: Russell (center) with his (left to right) son Wayne, grandsons Joseph and Kirk Jr., and son Kirk.

Russell was born on Long Island in 1936 after his parents arrived here from Germany. He began working alongside his grandfather Otto and father Kurt at an early age, producing azaleas in Queens, New York. He went on to study and graduate from Cornell University in 1957 and completed graduate studies at the University of Maryland. Eventually, Russell and his father branched out to begin the present-day Kurt Weiss Greenhouses Inc.

After Kurt was injured in an automobile accident, Russell, who was in his 30s at the time, assumed leadership. What started as a small company primarily growing azaleas for the New York City carriage trade quickly became known for growing azaleas, hydrangeas, annuals, perennials, tropical plants and more.

Russell served as president and CEO from 1972 until handing the company off to the next generation in 2016. Under his leadership, the company quickly turned into a full-fledged growing operation.

By the early 1980s, Russell's grand vision helped build the company into a mini-conglomerate, providing landscaping services to the Park Avenue Mall in Manhattan, wholesaling other growers' crops, manufacturing horticultural equipment, and building and distributing boilers for greenhouses—even shipping coal when rising energy costs caused many greenhouse businesses to suffer. He purchased Dauernheim Nursery, one of America's oldest potted-plant growers, in addition to a company that produced water mats used to supply water to the plants, creating a vertically and horizontally integrated business. V&V Noordland Greenhouses, an engineering and construction company owned by Russell, was responsible for building greenhouses around the world, notably the construction of "The Land" at Epcot Center in 1983. He also built greenhouses at his alma mater Cornell.

Hard work and determination increased the company's revenue by more than 110 times over 40 years to include 18 locations spread over Long Island, upstate New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Florida and Canada. By the early 2000s, at its peak, the company was ranked as the largest greenhouse operation

in North America with over 12.5 million sq. ft. of greenhouse space and 2,600 employees.

In addition to his key business responsibilities, Russell was formerly President of the Long Island Flower Growers Association, was a member of the Board of Directors of Rabo Bank, and was on the Seeley Conference Board of Directors at Cornell University. **GT**