

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Establishing New Roots

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Taking over an existing operation isn't as easy as it may initially appear. The customers have become accustomed to a specific experience and may resist any changes the new owner brings forward. However, the potential challenges didn't hinder Ben Lizardi, the new owner of Engle's Farm & Greenhouse in Middleburg, Pennsylvania, from taking the reins. Instead, he recognized the opportunity, including understanding the importance of retaining a core group of loyal employees to help make the transition seamless.

Pictured: Ben Lizardi is the new owner of Engle's, which he purchased in the fall of 2020.

Ben grew up on a farm where plants and agronomy were a part of his daily life. However, it wasn't until he took classes in high school that he truly began to see the potential in plants.

"My high school offered horticulture classes and I participated in my local chapter of the Future Farmers of America (FFA), which had a small greenhouse," said Ben. "I would stop in on the weekends and water in the

greenhouse, and that is what started everything."

Plant science has always been an area of interest for Ben, specifically how different environmental and chemical factors impact plant growth, but despite this, he enrolled in chemical engineering at the local college. After the first semester, Ben recognized that he missed growing and left the program.

"It was February and a local greenhouse was just put on the market," said Ben. "I used the money that I had saved from my retail job and purchased the property with the plan to grow hydroponic tomatoes."

Ben continued to work at his full-time retail position as his greenhouse operation slowly grew.

"My parents were extremely supportive as I slowly built my new business," said Ben. "They not only helped with the operation part of things, but also helped connect me with others in the industry."

Flowers were added to the operation, beginning with 15,000 hanging baskets and 50 flats in the first year of operation. The demand for flowers continued to escalate, so he transitioned the operation away from hydroponics to focus on flowers.

"I decided to do fall mums one year. I did 600 mums for the first year, sold out within the week and so I built a bigger field for the following year and grew 3,000 mums, but they also sold out quickly," said Ben.

By the fall of 2020, he got the opportunity to purchase an existing property to expand his greenhouse business, including a new field to expand mum production to over 10,000 plants.

"Owning my own greenhouse and business is my ideal career," said Ben. "Everything simply fell into place and then the opportunity to purchase Engle's was made available; the timing was perfect."

Engle's, which Ben took over this past March, is the ideal space to bring his dream of owning and operating a one-stop-shop garden center to fruition. The operation included a larger greenhouse area, a small retail store, a team of employees and a loyal customer base.

"There was a steep learning curve involved with taking over the business in the midst of ordering season," said Ben. "There were both suppliers and vendors that I hadn't dealt with before, but the existing employees helped make the transition a seamless one."



Pictured: Engle's Farm & Greenhouse in Middleburg, Pennsylvania.

Ninety-five percent of the stock is grown in-house, either from seed, cutting or bare root, which has helped provide full control of the material and ensure that the customers receive the high quality that they've become accustomed to. Ben credits the current success of Engle's to those employees who have a deep understanding of the operation, including little details, like which plants do best in which greenhouse.

"They understand the intricacies of this operation and I am thankful that they have been supportive throughout this changeover," said Ben.

Future plans for the operation include opening it year-round and expanding the retail selection to allow it to evolve into a one-stop destination for gardening and outdoor living needs.

"My favorite aspect of the operation right now is the houseplant section; you can't help but smile as you walk through that section," said Ben.

He said he's thankful that the new operation continues to provide opportunities to become fully immersed in growing, including continually discovering new products to offer to his expanding customer base.

When asked to reflect on his horticultural journey, Ben shared that it was the hands-on experience that broadened his understanding about the industry and his strengths. However, it was the supportive community that helped ensure his continued success in the field.

"Everybody in this industry is willing to help each other out, and share their knowledge and experiences," said Ben.

"It's not just everybody running in their own lane; they are willing to help each other out and provide the resources and support to solve challenges." **GT**

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wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.