

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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In Memoriam: Bill Van Belle

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Bill Van Belle, founder of Van Belle Nursery in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada, passed away July 5. He was 80.

Bill was born in 1945 in Enschede, the Netherlands and immigrated with his family at age 4 to Canada, where they eventually settled in Bowmanville, Ontario. His mother and father tried their hand at vegetable and cattle farming, but Bill joked that his dad, “didn’t know the front or hind end of a cow.” Bill’s father kept trying different ventures, and eventually, the family found their way to growing ornamental plants. As Bill recalled, he respected his

parents for pursuing different enterprises, and that they always found a way to make a living and support their family with dignity.

Bill earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography and Spanish from the University of Waterloo, and a Certificate in Horticulture from the University of Guelph. He met his wife, Grace, while living in Bowmanville and they married in 1970. In 1973, after moving from Ontario to Abbotsford, B.C. and working for a local landscaping company, Bill and Grace decided to start Van Belle Nursery. Bill had discovered a strong Ontario market for nursery stock grown in B.C. and also a knack and love for rooting flowering shrub liners in their tiny backyard greenhouse.

DeVonne Friesen, president of Bloomin’ Easy Plants, a division of Van Belle, wrote of Bill, “For anyone who knew Bill the nurseryman, you knew him as an optimist, a nonconformist, inventor, a joke-teller with a hearty laugh, a man of faith and an occasional firebrand. He was also an aggressive-but-savvy founder who was comfortable taking calculated risks while understanding that mistakes were inevitable and even proof of pushing past too-often accepted limitations. Bill would often remind his son Dave (current President of Van Belle) and the team of leaders, that ‘the guy who doesn’t do anything doesn’t make mistakes.’ He operated that way himself through the years and set this tone as part of his legacy, encouraging Dave and the team to embrace the freedom to take aggressive, but thoughtful, action without being motivated by fear.” **GT**