

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Metrolina, South Central Merge

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Metrolina Greenhouses of North Carolina and South Central Growers of Tennessee have agreed to merge into one company. The owners are cousins who've worked together for years and share the same important values, culture and business philosophy that have made each company a success on its own.

The merger was formalized January 1, with the three brothers who own South Central—Alex, Ron and Tim Van Der Hengst—as shareholders in Metrolina along with the four VanWingerden brothers—Art, Abe, Michael and Thomas. Each will fill specific rolls within the joint business (listed below). Also, South Central will be renamed Metrolina Greenhouses, Springfield.

Metrolina has 200 acres of greenhouse in Huntersville, North Carolina, 200 acres of growing space in York, South Carolina (the former Stacy's Greenhouses); South Central has 25 acres of greenhouse and 17 acres of outdoor space in Springfield, Tennessee. Combined, the business will now serve 1,600 Home Depot, Lowe's, Walmart and Sam's Club stores.

Why the merger, especially when it's two family businesses joining forces?

In the press release, Abe offers "growth" as the reason: "At its core, this merger is about growth. Growth allows us to invest more, serve customers better and create more opportunities for our people. This partnership enables us to grow faster and smarter by bringing together two highly aligned teams."

Via Teams, Abe explained more about that growth, saying it's not about physical size or rankings in a magazine.

"This is growth that allows us to take our strategy and apply it across more stores," he explained. "This allows us an additional facility that has growth opportunity from a land standpoint. From a regional standpoint, right now we have folks asking us to ship to areas that we are not comfortable shipping to from Huntersville, North Carolina, or York, South Carolina, but now we can potentially do that from Springfield, Tennessee. So there is a regional play here, too, that really gives us a lot of options."

"Middle Tennessee is a fast-growing area," added Alex. "There's a lot of opportunity for growth at this location."

And conveniently, Metrolina and South Central's sales territories are contiguous to each other.

"So this is a natural progression from east to west that just fits like a glove when you think of those elements of it—logistically, strategy-wise, common customers, common business philosophies," said Abe.

He added that the deal was not spur-of-the-moment; they'd been working on the details for a couple of years.

"It took some time for us to find the right timing, the right common ground, the right framework to put it together."

Alex's reason for doing the deal and becoming part of Metrolina is that, as a mid-sized operation, South Central was in a potentially precarious position, at least long-term, because most of the bankruptcies or acquisitions taking place in the last decade or so had happened to businesses of a similar size.

"So we knew we probably would have to do something," he admitted. "We're a very healthy company. We're not concerned about today. I'm not really concerned about tomorrow. But, you know, it would be silly to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that we couldn't fall victim [to major industry changes or an acquisition] in the future ... If we can't meet our customers' demands in whatever area—technology, service teams, you know, those kind of things—then we're not big enough and we're going to get left behind."

Bottom line: The deal gives Metrolina the additional scale they need to continue to be able to say "yes" to customer demands, whether it be the geography they cover or the services they offer. And it gives South Central access to the cutting-edge technologies growers need today and in the future to serve the mass market—things like the predictive analytics that tell you how much you sell when it's 80F and sunny versus 72F and cloudy, and the logistics to get product to all those customers efficiently and effectively.

"To be able to get on board with an organization that is going to be able to be on the forefront of all these new technologies ...? I'm not going to lie, that's pretty exciting, right?" said Alex.

As for responsibilities following the merger:

- Abe will be Chief Executive Officer of Metrolina Greenhouses
- Art VanWingerden will be Chief Operating Officer, Supply Chain, Horticulture and Site Management
- Alex will be Chief Revenue Officer
- Michael VanWingerden will be Chief Operating Officer, Labor and Logistics
- Thomas VanWingerden will be Chief Operating Officer, Operations
- Ron Van Der Hengst will be Chief Operating Officer, Springfield Site
- Tim Van Der Hengst will be Chief Growing Officer, Springfield Site
- The rest of the executive leadership team will remain in their current roles

Speaking of responsibilities, another benefit of the merger is creating a business that's attractive to the next generation of VanWingerdens and Van der Hengsts.

"Our dads expected us to come work in the greenhouse and we felt obligated to do it," said Abe. "I probably broke that mold a little bit and didn't do it right away, but there was always that pressure to do it. (Editor's

note: Abe worked for Proctor & Gamble for eight years before joining the family business). Our kids don't feel that pressure, and that's okay. We want them to go off and be successful. We want them to go off and do great things. But we want to create an organization that's attractive for them to come back and work at and potentially lead one day, with a role just as cool and sexy as a job in New York City or San Francisco or Chicago."

Alex summed up the deal neatly in this quote from the press release: "The industry is changing rapidly and consolidation isn't slowing down. We're passionate about this business and wanted a path that allows us to continue operating, growing and investing at a higher level. This merger gives us that opportunity while keeping our leadership team deeply involved.

"This is not an exit—it's an opportunity. By combining leadership, systems and scale, we can grow faster together than either company could independently." **GT**