

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

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## Up & Coming Businesses

*Jennifer Duffield White*

We are proud to debut our 12th annual group of GrowerTalks' Up & Coming Businesses. In the last dozen years, we've had the pleasure of introducing more than 55 Up & Comers, from small mom-and-mom types to giant greenhouse ranges.

Just what is an Up & Coming Business? We like to think of them as companies that are leading by example. They aren't always big. They aren't always well known. Sometimes they're 75 years old, and sometimes they're four years old. Some of them cater to a niche, while others have mastered an offering of diversity. For all their differences, they are businesses that have figured out how to excel in a tough business world.

It's *GrowerTalks'* way of honoring the achievements of great businesses, no matter what the scale is. And it's also our way of introducing you to growers who will lead, by their example, this industry into the future.

Personally, I love the diversity of the 2008 Up & Comers and how they can be role models for any number of growers and grower/retailers.

We have Eagle Creek Growers, which offers both a destination retailing experience, as well as a rapidly growing wholesale division that's putting new meanings to the word efficiency. This relatively young business is run by young, ambitious owners, and it's rapidly making a name for itself. Owner Jill Cain was nominated for *Green Profit's* Young Retailer Award in 2007, while her brother, Wholesale Manager John Bonner, was a nominee for *GrowerTalks* Young Grower Award

Then, over in Idaho, we have Edwards Greenhouse, which set up shop in 1930. They exhibit a unique blend of keeping the charm of a multi-generational business while still forging ahead to keep ahead of the trends and run a thriving business. One of the reasons we chose Edwards, as well, is their commitment to becoming a more sustainable business. Owner Garnette Monnie was well ahead of the curve in deciding to make sustainability a priority.

Years ago, we named Beds & Borders, Laurel, New York, and its co-owner, the late Kathy Pufahl, as an Up & Comer; and we're glad we did because Kathy transformed the notion of container gardening and really pushed the

envelope for this industry with the varieties of 4-in. annuals she was growing at the time. We feel the same way about the DeWalds of DeWald Gardens in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Maria DeWald leaves people buzzing about her container designs, and she continually introduces new plant material to the palette of possibilities for combination plantings. In addition, this company offers a solid example of how to run a profitable niche business.

And then, there's Wildwood Landscape in Michigan, where their niche is not a product, but a diversity of services. Owner Justin Heyboer has built an admirable business model where keeping things "in house" means more than cutting out the middle man; it means service. Wildwood does everything from growing its own perennials and annuals to selling them at their garden center, designing and installing the landscapes for their customers, and even maintaining those landscapes.

## **Business Profiles**

### **Eagle Creek Growers**

*Leading a new generation*

They're good at talking the talk, but they also know how to walk the walk. With a state-of-the-art garden center, a thriving wholesale business and a team of young, forward-thinking individuals at the helm, Eagle Creek Growers Inc., Mantua, Ohio, has an impressive setup that would make any grower or retailer envious.

Founded by Jill (Bonner) Cain in 1998, when she was just out of college, and now owned by Jill and her husband Todd, the business has evolved into two vibrant divisions. One is Eagle Creek Growers, a high-end destination garden center that has found its niche in more than plants; they also specialize in gifts, food, and landscape design services. The other division, Eagle Creek Wholesale, has grown in leaps and bounds, with the help of good salesmanship, technology and, more recently, the pursuit of a more sustainable business model.

On the retail side, Jill and her team have created a shopping environment that caters to even the most discerning customers. The 65,000-sq. ft. area includes flowers, houseplants, trees, hardscape supplies, and traditional gardening accessories, along with a diverse collection of gift and décor items and outdoor furniture. Within that setting, there's also Creekside Farm Market, which features produce, dairy products, baked goods and even Boar's Head meats and cheeses.

If there's one thing that Gen X and Gen Y scream for, it's for retailers to have a web presence, and Eagle Creek's cyber image is as sleek as their bricks-and-mortar image. They even have a virtual tour, with a map and clickable photos, to introduce viewers to the garden center and its offerings.

The plants at the garden center are grown by Eagle Creek Wholesale. However, the two divisions of the company share more than just a plant supply. They also share a commitment to sustainability. Both facilities have been designed for efficiency, and they have a keen eye for reducing waste and recycling.

Eagle Creek's biggest change to date has been the purchase of a 300 hp Hurst boiler that can burn anything from wood chips to shredded tires. The ideal fuel for Eagle Creek, though, is cow manure from the family farm (a separate business), which about 1,000 head of cattle. For Eagle Creek, it's a local, cheap fuel source. For Bonner Farms, they don't have to pay the diesel fuel cost of shipping or spreading the cow manure, says Jill's brother, John Bonner, who is general manager of the wholesale division.

In 2008, they expect to burn a fuel mixture with 90% cow manure. John hopes that the farm can be a source of even more "closing the loop" efforts. "The cow pot thing is really interesting to me," he says of the possibility of eventually making containers with cow manure as a component. (John and Jill 's parents started Dillen Garden Center and Dillen Products.) Incorporating the manure into their growing mix is another wish.

For now, Eagle Creek is using Summit Plastic's biodegradable pots made of rice hulls, and they're currently trying out the Biopot from Bellan International. Other sustainability efforts include the fact that they already recycle 80 to 90% of their water, use heat-retention curtains, and IPM. In fact, they've already filed the initial paperwork to become Veriflora certified. "I think we're pretty far along in the process already," says John, referring to how many of the Veriflora requirements they already meet. "We want to get to the point where we're Tier Two certified."

This spring Eagle Creek will be taking sustainability one step further, to the consumer. They'll be trialing a branded program in select locations this spring to see if "sustainable" and "regular" plants look the same side by side, will consumers at least pay the same (or perhaps even more) for their eco-brand.

"I think it's here to stay," says John of the sustainability issue. For this business, though, it's not just a feel-good philosophy; it's also a money-saving strategy in many areas. In addition to saving money in heating and efficiency, they're looking into tax credits for such measures. They also tell wholesale customers that Eagle Creek's new biofuel boiler ensures them a greater price security over the long term (as compared to an oil-heated greenhouse). Right now, they're exploring grants that might help fund harnessing wind for electricity. They sit on the highest point in the county, with tons of wind, explains John.

As for the future, we expect to see Eagle Creek Growers pioneering new paths in sustainability, retail experiences, and how a business can be successful at both.

## **Edwards Greenhouse**

*Coming full circle, yet full-steam ahead*

Edwards Greenhouse, Boise, Idaho, may have already celebrated 75 years in business, but they aren't dusty or behind the times. No, we think owner Garnette (Edwards) Monnie is out in the lead when it comes to running a multi-generation farm with her eye and her heart dedicated to sustainability.

"Survival," says Garnette, "is based on educating yourself ... and it's the follow through."

In 1930, this location was truck farm growing vegetables. Garnette's father, Paul Edwards, began growing cuts, annuals and other potted crops when he took over in 1947. By 1970, they'd become a full-time retail outlet, with a wholesale division for excess inventory and seasonal items such as poinsettias and Easter lilies.

Today, with Garnette at the helm, Edwards Greenhouse has undergone restoration, retrofitting and expansion. It also includes an in-house floral shop called Carpenter's Custom Florists (which has been run by her cousin, John, and his wife, Karola Carpenter) and an acquired additional 20-acre growing facility called Gem Butte Greenhouses. They divide production between the geothermal-heated Boise facility and the propane-heated Gem Butte one, growing for both their own retail sales and to serve regional independent garden centers. The plants that need more attention stay in Boise (where heat is cheaper) while the easier crops get grown at the second location.

While much change has occurred at Edwards over the years, they still honor their past. In one of the restored greenhouses, Garnette hung a plaque in honor of the men who built it. "We need to remember where we came from so we don't make the same mistakes," she says of this blend of old and new, of remembering the past, keeping

what works and changing what doesn't.

Edwards Greenhouse is in the first wave of bedding plant growers getting Veriflora certified for sustainability, though Garnette admits it's been a journey just to get to this point of starting the certification process.

"I've been worried for a long, long time about the amount of plastic our industry throws away," she says. They started recycling as much as possible about 10 years ago. They collect everything from cardboard, to pop cans, to packing material from the floral shop, to plastic pots and trays customers return through a recycling program.

"If we're representing ourselves in the community as being a green industry, then we need to really make a commitment to being a green industry. It's not easy; our packaging isn't conducive to that," says Garnette. They've started growing their veggies in Ellepots, and with such a positive reaction from consumers, they're now trying to figure out how and if they can carry that over to flowering annuals.

Edwards Greenhouse got on board with Ball's Circle of Life program early on, using sustainable growing methods. "Slowly but surely we are working through our crops because you really have to retrain yourself." It's a long road ahead of them, though, she says. They've been treating perennials and vegetables with Daniels fertilizer and compost tea, and this year, she switched to treating her bulbs with compost tea.

However, it wasn't until she started looking at the Veriflora certification that the full scope of sustainability really hit her. It's the way you treat your employees. It's what you do with your waste water," explains Garnette.

In some ways, Garnette feels as though the business is coming full circle, back to some of the philosophies and techniques of prior generations when it comes to using resources wisely. "I've discovered that I miss my dad a lot. A lot of the knowledge he had is the knowledge I need today. He knew how to make use of every little thing. For a business like ours, we need to do that. We can't be disposable."

One thing hasn't changed about Edward Greenhouse: It's still a family affair. Garnette's mother, who's 86, still works in the florist shop every day. Her daughter, Elise, works in the office, and another daughter, Erin, a college student, works in floral shop as a designer. Nieces and nephews have flowed through during summer jobs, and even those who aren't blood relatives get a say in how things are run.

As Edwards Greenhouse leads the way in growing sustainably, there's a responsibility there as well: "I need to be sure to share my enthusiasm not only with employees but with the public."

## **DeWald Gardens**

### *Designing the perfect niche*

Maria DeWald's container designs have started capturing the attention of growers around the country, but what makes DeWald Gardens, Fort Wayne, Indiana, an Up & Coming Business is the way this small, seasonal retail growing business has harnessed the ideals of their niche in the marketplace.

This 10-year-old business is the product of Stephen and Maria DeWald's passion for horticulture (they both have PhDs in horticulture) and their knack for keeping the focus on their specialties.

DeWald Gardens is only open for about 12 weeks a year, from mid April through mid July. Stephen notes, "The off season allows us to recover, regroup and stay enthusiastic about what we are doing. In this way, we hope to stay involved through our golden years, the time most people are retired."

The off season also allows them to travel and visit trial gardens. When your specialty is container design with

unusual plants, selecting new varieties is paramount. "We really try to see new plants at two to three trial locations and at several times of the season to make purchase and design considerations," Stephen explains. Maria also makes a point to attend floral shows and at least one major international event each year, as she finds the floral side to be miles ahead of our industry in terms of design.

With major chain stores just down the street, DeWald Gardens has nearly perfected standing apart. Part of that is the combination containers they're so well known for, as well as high-quality 4-in. annuals. They also pride themselves on service. But location is key, says Stephen. They put most of their marketing money back into improving the grounds. "We are on a good highway with great visibility (40,000 cars pass each day) and we keep upgrading our landscaping. We have 100 ft. of Purple Wave petunias hanging along the front of the entrance as well as killer window boxes and 20-in. hanging baskets. People see these and know we can grow plants and they work all season long. Everything is on drip with autotimers."

Even though their customer base remains the same, DeWald Gardens continues to increase their profits by reducing the costs of goods, raising their prices and increasing the average transaction.

"We make a point of personally visiting all of our competition to see what they are doing and their prices. Sometimes it is a little embarrassing when we visit some of the independents but it is always worthwhile. We then try to keep our prices on the high side of the competition (especially the box stores) since we always feel our product is superior and our staff has the best knowledge, all of which customers expect to pay a slight premium for," explains Stephen.

Last year, they raised prices 10 to 15% across the board, as they'd discovered their 4-in. annuals were only 11 cents above Home Depot's. In 2007, their 4.5-in. pots sold for \$4.29, designer 14-in combos sold for \$59.99 and \$64.99. They average more than \$90 per sale during most of the season.

With part-time help in just the spring, the DeWalds just hired their first full-time employee to help in the off season, as they grow some plants, such as Alocasias and Psudeoranthanums, for two seasons to get the "wow" factor for some of their combos.

While Stephen and Maria like keeping their business on the scale it is, they admit they've felt some pressure to be open year round. Yet, they're keeping growth in perspective. If they find the right people, they might develop into a full-scale operation, they say. But for now, "we want to keep enjoying life and truly smell the roses."

## **Wildwood Landscape Inc.**

### *Mastering the potential of diversity*

Putting a label on Wildwood Landscape Inc. is a difficult task. This Alto, Michigan-based business is a grower, landscaper, retailer, lawn mower, and even a landscape designer. For Owner and President Justin Heyboer, maintaining such diverse services doesn't stretch Wildwood Landscape too thin; instead, it creates a synergy between products and services that ensures the long-term success of his business.

Wildwood Landscape has seen an impressive growth curve during the life of the business. Justin started his career with a push mower 15 years ago. After getting a horticulture degree from Michigan State University, he grew Wildwood Landscape into a respected landscape design and installation company, but he didn't stop there.

In 2000, Justin bought 5 acres, built an office and storage facilities. Three years later, they added a greenhouse to grow their own perennials and a selection of annuals. A 2,500 sq. ft. floral and garden/gift shop followed in 2005. And

by 2006, Wildwood had a second retail location.

In short, if you live anywhere near Alto, Michigan, and you have or need any type of greenery—from lawns, to trees, perennials, annuals, or cut flower arrangements, Wildwood Landscape will have it or do it for you. Plus, with the draw of outdoor living equipment, hardscape materials, and home décor and gifts, it's pretty hard to resist doing business with this company.

The result is a business model that can connect with consumers from every "gardening" background—from turf only, to do-it-for-me types, to avid gardeners, or even the buyers of flower arrangements. And Wildwood also stands in the position to earn a customer's loyalty with a landscape design job and then continue to cultivate and grow that person as a landscape maintenance customer and/or as a customer at the garden center and florist shop.

The service side of the business, though, is where Justin sees the most potential for growth. "It's only going to increase," he says. "People—especially my generation—just don't have the time."

Thus, as a business, they make sure they go way beyond the cliché of good customer service. What makes the difference? Wildwood prides itself on its speedy responses, even to last minute requests in the rush of spring. "When customers call for an estimate or to ask a question, it's the turnaround time. Customers tell us all the time that's why they choose us," explains Justin.

For those early planners, Wildwood Landscape offers free landscape design and consulting all winter long. Free? Yes. It pays off.

"Our designer books his whole spring that way," Justin explains. "We've done more new homes [for landscape design] this year than we have in the last five years." It keeps several installation crews busy during the warm months, as well as two designers.

On site, Wildwood keeps that same personal connection to its customers. The 4-acre garden design center allows for seasonal displays both indoors and out. They host classes on lawn maintenance, perennials, outdoor living, herb gardening, floral arranging and so on. And they even have a spring "Day of Inspiration" where they encourage people to try new floral and home décor designs—for both indoors and outdoors.

Justin admits, learning how to cater to Gen X—his own generation—is a challenge. "It's a tough generation to figure out. The Baby Boomers are easy to cater to." But with landscape projects for new homes on the rise, despite Michigan's less-than-stellar economy, Wildwood seems to be attracting some of the younger generation's business. Plus, as he points out, "My generation loves to do things last minute." And Wildwood Landscape has a step up on the competition when it comes to meeting the desires of last-minute customers.

As for the future, "Any way we can provide a service, we will," suggests Justin.