

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

7/15/2010

Learning and Growing

Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio



Mary Joyer sets two goals for herself each year: Learn something new and grow beautiful plants. As owner of Waldoch Farm Garden Center in Lino Lakes, Minnesota, Mary has a formidable work ethic in her veins. Her grandfather, William, worked in the gardens until he was 100 years old.

Waldoch Farm Garden Center has been a family-owned business since 1916, when Mary's grandparents, William and Anna, purchased the farm. What began as a farm where hay and chickens were raised for the farmers markets, evolved into a larger retail venture with the addition of a roadside stand built to sell their homegrown vegetables. Enter the second generation when Dan, William and Anna's son, purchased 10 acres from his father to build a house; grow grains, hay and vegetables; and raise cattle. Dan and his wife Lucille purchased additional land to build greenhouses for propagating vegetable plants and annuals. Mary and her father, Dan, were partners in the business until Mary took full ownership in 1997.

Presently, the third and fourth generations work in various capacities to continue in William's and Dan's boot steps. Mary's son, Andrew, is the perennials and shrubs manager; another son, Doug, takes care of the produce farms; Mary's sister, Kathy Rivard, is in charge of the containers and hanging baskets; and Kathy's son, Eric, who "can fix anything," Mary says, handles produce and maintenance.

Waldoch Farm Garden Center is located twenty minutes north of Minneapolis/St. Paul and less than five minutes from the interstate. The exceptional location, Mary says, allows them to pull from a large area including Duluth, two hours north by car. The garden center's growing area is comprised of 8,000 sq. ft. of outdoor space and 19,000 sq. ft. undercover in three Nexus greenhouses, four large hoop houses and five small hoop houses.

When Mary's sons became part of the operation, like any mother, she worried about the capacity of the business to ensure profitability for them. To tackle that dilemma and to become a more prosperous business, Mary joined The Garden Center Group, which enabled her to get an objective look at the garden center space.

The Garden Center Group's Sid Raisch recommended landscape architect, Robert Hayter, and they both spent a day evaluating Waldoch Farm. They reconfigured the indoor space to eliminate numerous dead-end aisles. By doing so, two customers and their carts are able to pass in each aisle. Another adjustment involved the placement of the hanging baskets, which previously ran parallel with the front of the store; the baskets now run perpendicularly, no longer blocking the customers' views of the store.

Waldoch Farm offers fundraising opportunities to 4-H, scout and church groups, says Mary. A few of the groups carry on the traditional fundraising procedure: Taking plants to sell and returning the items left unsold. Mary says the difficulty with this process lies in incorporating these plants back into the stock, finding the items' locations in the garden center and reviving them if they have been stressed. She is instead turning to the certificate method of fundraising: Selling a \$10 certificate to the group for \$8, which allows the group to keep the \$2 profit.

Patrons of Waldoch Farm—ranging from the 30-year customer to the young, first-time homeowner—come to Waldoch Farm for the variety of vegetables, the heartiness of the plants and the beautiful containers and baskets. Mary says their plants are well conditioned. When frost is in the forecast, she wheels six hay wagons of plants in a shed. As the day warms, the plants are returned outside to enjoy the early spring sunshine. They grow perennials, annuals, vegetables and herbs themselves and in a range of sizes. Shrubs are bought in from other growers. As for the big box stores, Mary says that they aren't greatly affected by their presence, mostly due to Waldoch's superior quality. Their plants "hit the ground running and keep growing," Mary reports one landscape customer saying.

Mary's husband, Jeff, is a real estate agent in the Lino Lakes area. Jeff keeps the business in the family by sending his realty clients—new homeowners—a certificate for a free hanging basket from Waldoch Farm. Mary says the new homeowners redeem the certificate at the garden center, and ultimately purchase additional plants.

Already, Mary has accomplished her goals for the past year—she learned something new when she asked for guidance and changed the flow of her store; and she has grown spectacular plants that compel landscapers and homeowners alike to drive from miles away.

Everyday efficiencies

Mary offers these tips for better efficiency:

- Try to retain the staff to avoid the need to train new employees. The present staff members know how you like to do things.
- Use an automated watering system to save time and money in labor costs and water usage. While watering 400 flower pouches, the water is directed precisely at the plants with little run-off.
- Controlling inventory is a big money, time and water saver. Waldoch Farm used to fill their entire space, but realized they couldn't sell everything. "Plant a little more than you can sell," says Mary. "If you have ten flats left, you grew too many plants. In June, we count the remaining plants to know what we sold and what we need to plant for next year." **GT**