

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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### Planting for the Gardens of Tomorrow

*Anne-Marie Hardie*

As a child, Bobby Green, Sr. loved to grow lilacs, roses and peonies at his home in Chicago. A natural green thumb, Bobby Sr. made the decision to leave winter behind and create a new home in Fairhope, Alabama, where he could grow year-round. His hope was to share his passion for these shrubs with the local community.

Green Nurseries opened in 1932, during a time that owning a nursery included raising chickens, cattle and cutting firewood. It was a difficult time for a grower, but Bobby Sr. persevered, cultivating plants and selling them from the back of a Model A Ford Truck at the local courthouse square.



However, he quickly learned that the plants that had flourished in Chicago failed in the Zone 8b climate of Alabama. Bobby Sr. knew that if he wanted to keep on growing he would need to discover some new plants to propagate.

“It was around this time that he was fortunate to have met two Japanese men in Mobile, Alabama, who worked for a major nursery and learned about growing camellias,” said Bobby Green, Jr. “He worked for them during the day and then in his own nursery in the off hours.”

*Pictured:*

1. Bobby Green, Jr. and his wife Debra run their second-generation operation Green Nurseries in Fairhope, Alabama.

2. Bobby Jr. and Bobby Sr., who started the business, circa 1959.

3 & 4. Bobby Sr. used to sell plants from the back of a Model A Ford Truck.

Bobby Sr. learned the ins and outs of growing camellias, and they became the bread and butter for Green Nurseries throughout the '30s and '40s.

His father was what Bobby Jr. fondly called “a change purse hybridizer.” The leather change purse that Bobby

Sr. carried doubled as a cash register, but also held other items, including seeds that Bobby Sr. believed held promise.

“The seeds from the change purse produced a few camellias we still grow today, including *Camellia sasanqua* Sarrel—named for my niece—and a seedling of Showa No Sakae,” said Bobby Jr.

The camellia business thrived for over two decades until the unprecedented freeze in the '60s. The camellia crop suffered extensive damage, including the intergenerational characteristics that had been nurtured over the years.

“My family mourned the loss to such a degree that they wouldn’t replace them,” said Bobby Jr. “When I came along to work in the business in the '70s, we were doing everything except growing camellias. In fact, I had trouble finding them.”

## **Preserving the past**

For Bobby Jr., an integral part of the history of Green Nurseries was linked to the camellia plant and the hard work that his father had committed to these plants. So he made it his personal mission to bring camellias back to Green Nursery.

To do so, Bobby Jr. connected with local flower and landscape breeder Tom Dodd, Jr., who was a well-known hybridizer of camellias—in particular, the *hiemalis* cultivars. At the same time, Bobby Jr. worked to bring back some of the camellias that his father had original hybridized.

With the motto, “Preserving the past and propagating the future,” Green Nurseries has set itself apart as specialists in *Camellia sasanqua* and *Camellia japonica*. In the past 24 years, Green Nurseries has released 15 camellias and patented eight of them.

“For every one *Camellia japonica* sold in America, there are probably 10 *Camellia sasanqua*,” said Bobby Jr. “They can be easily used across the board, from shrubs to trees. I even see people substituting them in areas which used to be the domain for junipers and boxwood.”

Once seen as a domain for the rich, camellias are now found across the state, including in people’s first homes.

## **Propagating the future**

Today, Green Nurseries is expanding plant exploration to include not only new varieties of camellias, but native plants.

“The Mobile River delta has been fondly named America’s Amazon,” said Bobby Jr. “One little area, called the Red Hills, boasts the widest diversity of small trees in North America, including rhododendrons, new species of witch hazel and native azalea.”

It’s Bobby Jr.’s dream to have a garden that would simply be a continuous walk in the woods, seamlessly incorporating the native plants of his surrounding region. For him, there’s nothing that can compete with that

native beauty and he aspires to bring the native plants back into the gardens of his surrounding community.

When asked about the continued success of Green Nurseries, Bobby Jr. attributes it to his core employees, including his wife Debra, who Bobby jokes won't allow him to retire.

"We have two employees who have been with us for what seems like forever: Todd Carol, who came to work for us right after college 26 years ago, and another gentleman, Shawn Wasp, who has driven 50 miles to work for the last 18 years," said Bobby Jr.

When asked about the future of horticulture, Bobby Jr. is extremely optimistic, stressing that although there are less folk interested, those who are, are engaged and passionate. There's still so much opportunity in this industry, shares Bobby Jr., the key is to start one greenhouse at a time and grow slowly.

"Small nurseries can flourish by finding a niche and focusing on less-common plants," says Bobby Jr. "And if you become adept at propagation, people will be knocking at your door to grow young starter plants."

With 85 years of business behind them, the 13-acre Green Nurseries has provided a strong example showing that finding a niche in the industry can result in a successful business. **GT**

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