

GROWERTALKS

Features

2/28/2017

New Additions

Jennifer Zurko

The tired saying, “If you build it, they will come” doesn’t really work when describing why a grower would build additional greenhouses. No one puts the time and money into a new range with the hope that there will be enough orders to fill it. The old fingers-crossed method doesn’t work well in this business.

The better reason would be along the lines of what you’d hear a hoarder say: “We need more room because we have more stuff.”

And because of that reason, two fair-sized operations are getting bigger with new building projects.

Shelter for the shrubs

As one of the Proven Winners plant propagators, Four Star has been fortunate to see consistent sales growth, said Jeff Back, Director of Greenhouse Operations, which means they’ve had to continue to add new ranges to accommodate the growth.

Pictured: The layers of the ErfGoedFloor system, which uses crushed granite and a plastic permeable membrane under a weed mat. As with a typical concrete flood floor system, there’s a heat pipe running underneath.



Four Star has two locations in Carleton, Michigan, about a block from each other. Their main headquarters on Indian Trails Road has remained the same because there isn’t any room to build, so their second location on Sigler Road is where all the construction has been. During the last 10 years, they’ve added 280,000 sq. ft. of greenhouses, mainly for young plant propagation.

The newest addition is by far the largest and has been the most exciting for them, said Jeff. First, it’s 5 acres, which has “been quite the undertaking,” he said. Second, all 5 acres were built to house ColorChoice shrubs—a product that’s been really growing for the Proven Winners line.

“As a Proven Winners Partner it’s important for us to carry all products under the brand,” Jeff explained. “Even though we have Spring Meadow as the supplier for ColorChoice Shrubs, we wanted to have it where we could finish 1-gallon, 3-gallon shrubs and sell them locally, sell them with our garden-ready products and also with our online sales.”

As more of their homeowner customers get comfortable with ordering plants online, Four Star and the other Proven Winners partners have noticed an uptick in shrub sales.

“It’s a pretty hot item to sell online because it ships well and holds up well,” said Jeff. “Educating folks to buy annuals online is still a work in progress, whereas people have no reservations about shrubs.”

So now there’s a brand-new Westbrook apex open-roof greenhouse currently filled to capacity with shrubs. The reason for the open-roof style is natural air flow and growing the shrubs cool. Jeff said they force about 10% to 15% of the shrubs to get a head start and let the rest grow naturally without freezing them.

Many shrub and nursery growers like to produce these crops outside, so how come Four Star decided to just build a large range to grow them indoors? For more control and to allow automation in handling the product, said Jeff.

“We like a controlled environment for producing the best product possible,” he explained. “We wanted to have a greenhouse environment where we could separate out the shrub production, and treat it as needed with sprays and biologicals. We can do all of these different things and then keep it out of the way of propagation.”

Although the house was built for shrubs, there is room for annual hanging baskets. And Jeff said they plan on moving some other annuals in there to finish as the shrubs ship out.

The other question is, now that EuroAmerican Propagators—which was one of the Proven Winners partners located in southern California—recently declared Chapter 7 bankruptcy, what does that mean for the other partners? Does this mean that Four Star and Pleasant View will have to expand even more to pick up the slack on those orders that normally went through EuroAmerican?

“The interesting thing is, even though the timing was bad, we had already been gearing up for growth in Proven Winners business,” Jeff said, “Enough to where we were ready to react and we have been able to accommodate the business with existing space.” Plus, they have four contract growers that they partner with to grow any excess product.

Regardless, even if Four Star wanted to build another greenhouse, it would have to be at a new third location. After this new 5 acres, they’re officially out of room at the Sigler Road facility.

The third reason why this new build is unique is that Four Star is using new, state-of-the-art automation. One-third of the range has an ErfGoedFloor, a flood system from a Dutch company that uses crushed granite and a plastic permeable membrane under a weed mat. Jeff said it’s less expensive than concrete flood floors and it’s supposed to be more resistant to disease spread due to the filtering of the granite. So far, the results have

been great—so much so that Four Star is considering converting the rest of the range to have ErfGoed floors.

They're also installing a Flying Fork System—the first U.S. grower to do so. AgriNomix introduced it at Cultivate'16 last year and it's basically a forklift, but instead of running on wheels from the ground, it's operated with a boom track. (You can see it in action at <http://tinyurl.com/flyingfork>.) It's great for moving larger containers, like shrubs, around the greenhouse.

"We're expanding and really trying to implement a lot of automation—it's been a big road here for us," said Jeff.

Space for spring

As with Four Star, Colorpoint needed more space to accommodate their growth, but for spring plant production only. Colorpoint's location in Paris, Kentucky, will have 6 new acres of open-roof greenhouses, while they will be adding 4 acres at the location in Granville, Illinois.

The reason to expand was simple, stated Ken Van Wingerden—they needed an additional 10 acres for growth and to be flexible, even when Mother Nature isn't cooperating. If the first two weekends of prime gardening season are rainy or cold, you're holding on to the product.

Another reason for the expansion is that Colorpoint has found that the industry is changing, and to continue to move forward, your operation has to change along with it, he said. Finding contract growers has become more of a challenge during the last few years; Colorpoint continues to look for contract growers to partner with to grow more product, so if you're a contract grower looking to pick up more business, Ken said to give him a call.

Colorpoint has broken ground, posts have been put in and all of the drainage for the ebb-and-flood floors has been completed. The majority of the construction will be done during the summer so that all 10 acres will be ready for spring 2018. **GT**