

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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The Family Matriarch

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Ma•tri•arch n.

- 1. A woman who rules a family, clan or tribe.*
- 2. A mother who is head and ruler of her family and descendants.*
- 3. A highly respected woman who is a mother.*

I've had the pleasure of working for, and with, Swift Greenhouses and the Swift family for more than 28 years now. I feel like we've all grown up together in this company and we're all family.

Despite how we've grown over the years, it's still a true family business. All business choices are agreed upon by the family and significant decisions, such as whether to build, must be unanimous.



I've truly never seen a family as close as the Swifts. They all live within 40 miles of each other and all work together, usually amicably, on a daily basis. They dine together regularly as a family, go on vacations together as a gang and as many of the clan attend kids' activities as possible.

The ruler of this tribe is without a doubt Carol Swift, aka Grandma Carol. With each role she plays, whether within the family or the company, she takes charge with a meticulous attention to detail. She's highly respected by all. She's the Swift Family Matriarch.

Pictured: Carol Ann Swift, the matriarch of Swift Greenhouses, passed away in January.

Larry and Carol Swift purchased a 15,000-sq. ft. glass greenhouse from Larry's father in 1965, built a home on the property and moved in 1967. It was a seasonal greenhouse, but with the arrival of her second child and her commitment to her babies and husband, Carol gave up her full-time job as a third-grade teacher to help out more in the greenhouse.

As the company grew, Carol kept track of the books and Larry focused on production and sales. With the invention and addition of seedling plugs in the mid '80s, Swift Greenhouses went wholesale and national.

Carol then took over the position as shipping manager. This involved long days on Mondays, and sometimes Sundays in the spring, prepping and boxing plug trays (these were the only Sundays you wouldn't find her in church playing the piano). Nobody worked harder than Carol, especially on shipping days. And on top of that, she kept all of the paperwork organized without the aid of computers.

While she always loved children, Carol's whole personality changed in 1996 when she took on a role which ended up defining a big part of who she is: grandma. With two grandkids arriving within months of each other, she did what she did with every other aspect of her life—she took charge.

As the number of grandkids grew to seven, she would often have “baby day” at the house, turning it into the family daycare and allowing her kids to run the greenhouse. As the grandkids grew, she never missed a sporting event or school activity, always wearing school colors and having photo buttons plastered all over her and Grandpa Larry's clothing.

But this didn't keep her away from the greenhouse or her work. After the 4:30 bell, she could often be seen coming through on the golf cart with any number of grandkids piled in and a big smile on her face. When the kids were gone for the evening, she would still get the greenhouse books done, at times staying until midnight during peak season.

Carol was diagnosed with leukemia in August. This slowed her down and she officially “retired,” but it didn't keep her from doing payroll. This had always been her duty and she hand-signed the checks nearly every week.

Carol Ann Swift went to be with the Lord on January 26 after defying the doctors' odds. She passed away peacefully at home surrounded by her loving family. Though her presence in the greenhouse is missed on a daily basis, her memory and legacy live on with her family and the success of this company, as well as a trade-marked aquilegia named for her.

It's a huge adjustment going through the first spring without her. I can still hear her on the radio, “Scott! Can you hear me?” Then Scott mumbling under his breath, “Everybody can hear you!” Carol was a small, but mighty, determined, spunky and strong woman. She made sure everybody could hear her.

Carol was an inspiration to all with her work ethic and organization (clothes pins were key to her organization of paperwork). She leaves behind her core values with this company, which we all aspire to achieve: integrity, honesty, fairness and loyalty.

A heartfelt thank you to Larry, Scott, Todd and Shauna (Cook) Swift for sharing their memories and stories of Grandma Carol with me.

Godspeed. **GT**

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