

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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The Williamson Legacy

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It's often been said that it's the people, not the structure, that will determine the success of the business. That's truly the case for Thomas (Tom) Williamson, and the legacy he created with RCW Nurseries and Williamson Tree Farm.

Passionate, creative and dedicated, Tom seems to have been destined to become a grower. He obtained his horticulture license in 1962, but more than a decade would pass before he became actively involved in the industry. His growing journey officially began in 1979, while as an employee at Shell Oil, Tom and two of his coworkers opened a retail garden center in Houston, Texas: RCW Nurseries.

Pictured: David Pounds, son-in-law of Tom Williamson, joined the company in 2006 and says he was privileged to have been able to learn from Tom.

RCW Nurseries fueled Tom's passion and opened new horizons, including what would eventually become Williamson Tree Farm, in Plantersville, Texas. This farm, shared with son-in-law David Pounds, was initially a place to grow some products to restock the retail nursery. However, it wouldn't be long before this small growing operation became its own business entity, serving both local wholesalers and landscapers.

"Tom always loved to grow things, whether it was trees, landscape shrubs, or unusual plants," said Pounds. "He wasn't afraid to try something new and would often grow things new to our area. This turned out to be an extremely successful business model." With two budding businesses, Tom had found his passion, and piece by piece, began to grow his operation into a thriving family business.

A natural grower, Tom retired from Shell Oil to work in the horticulture industry full time. Upon doing so, he bought out the other two owners of RCW Nurseries and fully delved into the business. Today, both businesses continue to be family owned and operated, with Tom's son, David Williamson, taking the reins as the majority owner/president. Tom's daughter, Cheryl, plays an active role in the retail operation, while Doris Scutt, who was married to Tom, remains the matriarch of the organization. "Doris continues to be the bookkeeper for both operations, keeping a steady eye on the accounting side," said Pounds. "But beyond that, she is the person who the family relies on to bounce off ideas and help keep everything in line."

David Pounds, husband of Cindy Williamson Pounds, joined the company in 2006, working at the tree farm beside his father-in-law. He felt privileged to be able to spend a few years with him, as he tried to absorb both his expertise and knowledge. “He was an extremely creative grower and great business man,” said Pounds. “But what really stood out was Tom’s heart; he was always willing to help and share his knowledge.”

Growing a variety of products continues to be Williamson Tree Farm’s objective, with the unofficial tagline of “We don’t grow 2,000 of anything, but we grow 2,000 different things”. The challenge with growing such a variety of products is the volume of information employees need to know to properly care for the plants.

The secret to their success, shared Pounds, is their incredibly supportive team of long-term employees and the consistent communication within the management team. “We have guys who have been with us for 18-plus years,” said Pounds. “This stable employee base enables us to continue to have a diversified portfolio of material.” Grower Javier Gonzales is one employee who has been working with the Williamson family for almost 30 years. “Javier’s keen grower’s eye alerts the team to any potential problems,” said Pounds. “My role is more of a sales and operation manager; Javier is the one who truly understands the needs of the plants.”

Tom passed away in 2009, leaving a legacy for his family to carry on. “I wish he had written multiple books, he was a man of so much knowledge,” said Pounds. “It was a tremendous loss and I feel so honored to be able to talk about him.” The business continues to operate with Tom’s vision in mind, with the family members and employees often thinking “What would Tom do?” prior to making major decisions.

“His son David has that same mentality, he is an extremely creative guy and very artistic in his thought processes,” said Pounds. “He instinctively knows what plants we should grow and how they will fit in the landscape; he finds oddball stuff to grow, and is not afraid to take the risks to see how they will do.” Following closely in his father’s footsteps, David Williamson continues to bring forward new product ideas and changes for the business.

Currently, Pounds stated, the company is in a state of growth, while trying to adapt with both the new world and changing economy. Technology has become a vital part of this adaptation, with Williamson Tree Farms actively incorporating tools to improve efficiencies, decrease costs, and ultimately provide a better product to their end consumer. “David Williamson is continually looking at new methods to make the company more efficient, particularly with how to manage their incredibly diverse portfolio,” said Pounds.

To address this need, Williamson Tree Farm is in the process of custom building an inventory system that will provide real-time inventory information to their customers. This new system will not only be used for sales, but also to track the plant’s history, including its origin and any treatments used on the materials. Although there is still a lot of groundwork to be done, it’s Pounds’ hope that the system will be functional by August.

Future plans for Williamson Tree Farm include drilling a new water well so that the family can open up 13 additional acres for growing. With over 35 years of business, it’s this family’s commitment to a high-quality product, solid growth, communication and team work that has paved the way for continued success. **GT**

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