

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Catching Up with Spring Creek

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In the January 2009 issue of *GrowerTalks*, Spring Creek Growers in Magnolia, Texas (right outside of Houston), was one of the four new businesses featured in an article about up-and-coming operations to watch. Now, eight years later, they've evolved from the new kids on the block to an established ornamentals business.

Not that they were new to the industry—owners Bob and Carla Jones had been running her family's Christmas tree farm since the early '90s. Carla's grandparents bought the farm in 1921 to grow produce for the local Houston market, and when Bob and Carla took over, they sold Christmas trees along with annuals and perennials. In 2004, they started selling wholesale to landscapers, IGCs and other re-wholesalers. Recently, their customer list grew to include multi-outlet grocery stores.



Pictured From left: Evan Jones, Bob Jones, Carla Jones and Lauren Jones-Kirchner—most of the family that runs Spring Creek Growers in Magnolia, Texas, minus Kristen Jones-Hartsfield.

Bob chalks up Spring Creek's success to being flexible and avoiding creative ruts.

"We like to stay cutting edge," he said, explaining that they're always trying out the newest varieties, and experimenting with innovative packaging and signage. "And we're more nimble; we can make decisions quickly. It allows us to beat others to the market with creativity. As we continue to grow, we make sure we don't get like the big guys—decision by committee."

The next generation, new ideas

Bob and Carla have three kids who grew up alongside them in the business: Lauren (Jones-Kirchner), Kristen (Jones-Hartsfield) and Evan. But they made it clear that there was never any pressure for them to be permanent employees.

All three of their kids explored other industries or other companies before deciding to join the family business on a full-time basis—Lauren lived in downtown Houston working in a cushy office job and Evan interned at Ball Horticultural Company in West Chicago, Illinois. Now, Lauren is Director of Sales & Marketing, and Evan is head of production. Kristen lives a few hours from Houston, but is able to handle all of Spring Creek's human resources from her home office.

All of them decided to come back to the family business, not just because they get to work with their parents, but because they have more flexibility to maintain more of a life-work balance with their own growing families.

And the younger Joneses are proving that their roles in the company have been earned, not given. Bob and Carla said that since Lauren joined the company full time they've been able to bring in new customers that they never thought would buy from them. They've implemented new processes in the front office to better manage inventory and orders by going paperless. And with Evan in the greenhouse, they've been working on updating their heating and irrigation systems. Plus, they're doing more with social media, especially with Facebook Live.

"All of us kids have an entrepreneurial spirit," said Lauren. "We want to make a difference. Before we were 'Bob's daughter' or 'Bob's son,' now we're making a name for ourselves."

Although Bob and Carla were going to support them no matter what career paths they chose, you can tell that they're very pleased—and proud—to be working alongside their children.

"Before, we were doing everything ourselves," said Carla. "And then the kids came in."

Building on the present for the future

When we visited in late April, spring in southern Texas was just wrapping up—especially this year, when their season started two weeks earlier in mid-February, which turned out to be a small blessing after a rough winter when the Houston area had two hard freezes. Because of that, a lot of product that normally survives the winters needed to be replaced. Although they had some challenges fulfilling the demand, the earliness helped increase the landscape side of their business. However, Lauren thinks based on previous years, landscape would have still been big for them this year.

As the seasons and years go on, Spring Creek is going "to continue to build on our core competency," said Lauren. And that means doing what they do—not just well—but above and beyond. They have two different locations, which helps them continue to produce their diverse product mix that includes the typical annuals and perennials, but also their specialties, like Guardian Blue Delphinium, Texas Bluebell (*Isianthus*) and Bluebonnet (*lupines*), which are must-haves in Texas gardens.

"We really take in consideration the Texas consumer," said Carla.

And, as with every year, the Joneses will soon be opening up their Christmas tree farm for the public to choose-and-cut their own trees in time for the winter holidays. It's been a tradition for their family for almost 100 years and it continues to be a significant part of their business. Lauren says they "make it a family event,"

with lots of fun attractions for kids and adults.

Who better to throw a family-oriented event than the Jones family that sticks together ... and works together?

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