

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Advocates for Crop Specialization

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One of the biggest decisions that a grower can make is determining which crops to grow. The decision needs to take in several factors, including demand, the environment and the overall return on investment.

For the owners of Creekside Growers in Delhi, Ontario, the decision to specialize in peonies and dahlias wasn't immediate. However, after seeing the positive results of specialization, Nick Vanderheide and his wife Hilary have become strong advocates of becoming the "go-to" grower for a specific product.



Pictured: Nick Vanderheide, owner of Creekside Growers in Delhi, Ontario, with his wife Hilary and their children. Left to right are Elijah, Lydia, Josiah and Asher.

The journey of Creekside Growers began in the fall of 2007 when Nick purchased a 5-acre farm outside of the city of Hamilton, Ontario, to host his construction company. At the time, neither Nick nor Hilary were growers, but they could see the potential that this plot of land held for their future.

And so, in 2009, the couple decided to experiment with growing peonies on their own property.

"My in-laws always grew peonies on a hobby farm," said Nick. "We knew we had the ability to research and (had) some knowledge to draw on from my in-laws and so, we thought, why not see if we could grow peonies for a bit of extra income?"

During those first few years, the couple delved into growing, gathering knowledge from Hilary's parents, fellow growers, their local agronomist and, of course, the Internet. In fact, Nick shared that their university educations have been vital to their success, equipping them both with the ability to analyze, research and learn.

Within two years, the Vanderheides were growing on a full-time basis.

“Construction served me fine, but I wanted to be home with my kids,” said Nick. “By 2011, I could quit construction and work hand in hand with my wife and children.”

Nick said, during these years, Creekside Growers tried growing several varieties of plants, annuals and perennials. However, they quickly learned that maintaining diversified crops on a small acreage farm was extremely challenging.

“When we started out full time, we tried about 30 different varieties of plants, annuals and perennials,” said Nick. “It was a disaster; we couldn’t keep up with that many different things.”

Instead of struggling year after year to keep up with the various crops, Nick and Hilary made the decision in 2013 to narrow their selection to peonies, dahlias and sunflowers. And in 2014, they narrowed it even further, deciding to become specialists in peonies and dahlias.

“We decided to streamline our business and specialize in strictly peonies and dahlias,” said Nick. “These two crops complement each other.”

But to grow their business, Creekside Growers recognized that they not only needed to understand the plants, but be extremely responsive to the needs of their buyers. Over the years, Nick shared that he’s invested a significant amount of time cultivating strong relationships with his buyers, striving to understand their needs and how Creekside Growers could respond to it. It’s about becoming the company that buyers can rely on—not only for its quality plants, but for its exceptional customer service.

Creekside Growers is committed to consistently go that extra mile for their buyers ... sometimes just to simply put a smile on someone else’s face.

“The most important thing with growing is developing a relationship with your buyers,” said Nick. “We are proud that we have developed personal relationships with a lot of our buyers, so that we are not only colleagues, but genuinely concerned about each other’s well-being.”

Nick and Hilary have also maintained positive relationships with their local agronomist and other local growers, both as a resource and a support network.

“I have a really good agronomist, Kirk Patterson, who is great at recognizing problems in plant growth,” said Nick. “I’m probably on the phone with him twice a week. His knowledge has been invaluable.”

With a few years of specialization under their belt, Creekside Growers recognized that they were outgrowing their current location, as they were renting three different spaces to fulfill their crop requests. So this past spring, they moved the entire operation to another farm.

“The old farm’s soil was heavy; primarily clay and did not have great access to water,” said Nick. “Dahlias thrive in sandy soil and are a water-hungry crop, and so we wanted to find a location that could provide this

crop what they wanted.”

The new farm, located near Delhi, was purchased in April 2017 and Creekside Growers dove right in, ensuring that they could fulfill their 2017 orders. In the fall, Creekside Growers has the labor-intensive process of removing the tubers from the soil into the barn for winter. Now with nine acres of dahlias from the ground, Nick made the decision to invest in a sweet potato harvester to assist with removing the tubers.

“We put the equivalent of apple bins onto the harvester with people, the harvester removes the tubers from the ground and then we simply collect them and bring them to the barn,” said Nick.

With the objective of continued growth, Creekside Growers opened their online store for tubers in July of this year. The response so far has been extremely positive, with between three to five people a day requesting to be added to the mailing list.

“I usually try to find a little extra work in the winter,” said Nick. “My hope is that with the online store, I will no longer have to. Selling online is the natural progression for our business.”

Nick’s hope for the future is to eventually begin producing dahlia tubers for wholesale and eventually expanding into greenhouse production. For now, Nick said that their goal is to simply sell more dahlias and peonies.

“Farming is challenging, but it is so fulfilling,” said Nick. “I encourage anyone that wants to go into this industry to try it, pick one to two crops, if you want to grow commercially, and simply grow them well.” **GT**

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