

GROWERTALKS

Front Lines

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Hort Couture, Post Raker

Chris Beytes

Coming with the announcement that C. Raker & Sons has been sold to Indiana grower Roberta's Unique Gardens is the confirmation that the Hort Couture partnership was NOT part of the deal, and that Jim Monroe and the company he founded 10 years ago is now back on his own after seven years of partnership with Raker.

Well, Jim is not quite on his own. He's been extremely busy since July, when he first got wind of Raker's financial challenges; since then, he's lined up three rooting station partners and three brokers to handle propagation and distribution for the coming season. They are:

- Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pennsylvania
- Skagit Horticulture, Mount Vernon, Washington
- Wenke Sunbelt, Kalamazoo, Michigan and Douglas, Georgia
- Ball Seed Company, West Chicago, Illinois
- Eason Horticultural Resources, Ft. Wright, Kentucky
- Fred C. Gloeckner Company, Harrison, New York

After receiving a Hort Couture press release, we called Jim to ask about his brand's situation.

"I don't think anybody saw this coming," he said of the sudden announcement of the Raker sale. He certainly didn't and he said he had lots of ground to cover in taking over all the various supply chain responsibilities, such as dealing with breeders, cutting farms, sales reps, marketing and so on.

"None of it was on my plate when this happened," he says. "Raker was basically running the program."

One of the first companies he reached out to was Ball Seed, who agreed to continue as a Hort Couture distributor. Ball also offered to help him manage the logistics of offshore production.

"That's a blessing beyond belief," Jim says.

The partnerships with Peace Tree, Skagit and Wenke give Hort Couture a more regional approach to propagation, he points out, with coverage in the East, Midwest and West. He also expects to add more distribution partners, such as McHutchison (one of the original Hort Couture distributors) and JVK in Canada.

The biggest change for Hort Couture: the branded pot is no longer a requirement (although the branded tag is). Jim explained that one thing he's learned about selling plants is that a required pot is "the single most limiting factor" in getting a customer to buy.

"In a perfect world, I may not have made the decision to remove the pot [requirement]," he says. "You have to figure out how to move forward, and my biggest goal was to make sure the cutting farms get paid and get the cuttings that we committed to get sold and make sure the breeders are getting paid ... removing the obstacle of the pot was done as much to make things easier on us moving forward.

"We still encourage everyone to buy the pots," he adds. "And they will." In fact, he says he got an order for branded pots just that morning.

Once production and sales are ironed out, Jim says his focus will be on R&D.

"We're a little company, with very little budget," he says, "but we have cool stuff. I think that's our strength: coming up with really interesting novelties. That has to be the focus. I think what will carry Hort Couture forward—or not—is new product development."

Lastly, Jim insists that Hort Couture will remain an independent-only program, just as it's always been.

"Our industry is not a healthy industry if we lose the independent channel. Things that can perpetuate independent businesses [such as] proprietary products that aren't in the box stores ... products that aren't [commodity] priced ... I think there are a lot of independents that have a deep appreciation for what we're trying to do." **GP**