

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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## Designing a Balanced Lifestyle

*Anne-Marie Hardie*

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Once you've been bitten by the plant bug, it's a hard industry to turn away from.

This was the case for Kim Bechle, owner and operator of the wholesale perennial nursery Still Pond Nursery in Douglassville, Pennsylvania.

Raised on a small farm in Pennsylvania, Kim could often be found outdoors fiddling in her vegetable garden. Her parents quickly took notice of her interest and urged Kim to enroll in a two-year associate degree program in horticulture at Temple University. It was the right move. The experience set in motion a new path, beginning with a position at the retail nursery operation, Mostardi Nursery in Newtown Square.

"I started at Mostardi's while still in college" said Kim. "It was an incredibly supportive environment and I can't say enough positive things about it. They taught me about quality, how to grow and why it's important to keep things tidy."

She spent the next 10 years absorbing everything that she could about growing. However, Kim wanted to start a family of her own and she knew that would be hard to balance while working at a retail nursery environment. So she set off to create her own career in horticulture.

Kim knew that she was still signing on for a seven-day-a-week position.

"I love to sell a finished beautiful plant," said Kim. "They are like my children—you want to send something beautiful out into the world. I take a great deal of pride in what I do."



*Pictured: Kim Bechle, owner and operator of the wholesale perennial nursery Still Pond Nursery in Douglassville, Pennsylvania, fell in love with horticulture when she was a little girl.*

But she was looking for an environment where the hours could be slightly more flexible than retail. The solution was to open a wholesale operation on her property, and provide perennials and annuals to the local garden centers and landscapers. Having her business on her property ensured that Kim was available to respond to the needs of her family, her clientele and, of course, the plants.

"In 1989, customers were beginning to look for perennials not just in the spring, but throughout the year. However, most nurseries didn't house perennials throughout the year," explained Kim.

Still Pond Nursery responded to this gap by providing finished perennial products throughout the growing season. With the assistance of her husband, who was a carpenter, Kim built the first greenhouse structure: a 48-ft. by 28-ft. hoophouse and opened her new business.

Initially, more than 90% of Still Pond's clientele were local retail garden centers, including Mostardi's Nursery, where Kim began her horticulture journey.

"Mostardi's Nursery is still one of my best customers," said Kim of the operation's continued loyalty. "I've learned so much from them; it is something that I'm definitely thankful for."

Today, the business has evolved to service landscapers, which now make up over half of the customer base. This balanced portfolio provides a steady stream of business for Still Pond Nursery, from March up until December. During the off season, Kim invests the time completing paperwork and maintaining the greenhouse structures.

"There is no question that I'm married to my business; it's not just a job, it's my passion," said Kim.

Today, Still Pond Nursery has expanded to include three heated houses, six additional hoophouses for overwintering in the winter and shade structures to protect the plants from the intensive heat in the summer. With nine part-time employees, Kim shares that she's blessed to have found a group of women who take pride in not only caring for the plants, but keeping the overall environment neat and tidy. In fact, one of her first employees was a co-worker from Mostardi's.

"It was wonderful to have her work with me. She helped not only with the business, but also with raising my two children, and then she left in order to raise her own family," said Kim.

When asked about the secrets to maintaining quality perennials, Kim is extremely modest. But there are three things that she's adamant about: hand watering, proper spacing, and a neat and tidy environment.

"You can't grow crops on top of each other," said Kim. "You need to invest the time to ensure that each perennial has adequate space."

Providing proper spacing and hand watering also helps to keep pests at a minimum. "If you space it right, fertilize and water it right, the pests tend to stay away," said Kim.

Watering is a job all its own. In fact, at Still Pond Nursery, Kim has three employees whose dedicated role is to

ensure that all of the plants are properly nourished. Hand watering is one of the more challenging tasks to teach, being part taught and part intuition.

“Not just anyone can water; you have to be both responsive and adaptive,” said Kim. Rainfall, sunlight, plant size and potting mixtures all have an impact on both the amount and frequency of water that the plant will require.

“With a new potting mixture this year and two weeks of rain, we are all relearning the watering this year,” said Kim.

The perennials are grown from plugs from several local sources and bare root material from Walters Gardens in Michigan. Each year, Kim strives to have a balance between the staple perennials and the new up-and-coming perennials. Her goal is to find her clients new varieties that will adapt well to their customers’ gardens.

“If I love a perennial, but it doesn’t sell, I have to let it go,” said Kim. “At the same time, if it sells well, but causes my customers a lot of challenges, I also set it free.”

Born out of a desire to merge Kim’s love of horticulture and raise her family, Still Pond Nursery has provided all that and more.

“My daughter needed someone to watch my grandson from 4:00 to 7:00 each day; I made it work,” said Kim. “We’ve certainly bonded. I don’t think I could have helped as much as I did if I had a traditional job.”

Today, Kim continues to put her heart and soul into the business, planning to operate Still Pond Nursery as long as she’s physically able to do so.

“I don’t play by the rules,” said Kim. “I come to work every day and do what I love.”

There’s no question that owning and operating your own business is a lot of work, but for Kim, she would have it no other way. **GT**

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