GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

9/1/2018

How Hard Work Pays Off

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Photography by Mark Widhalm

Moss will never grow on Evan Barrington.

I'm referring to the saying, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," and it's because Evan is constantly on the move. Never one to sit still, he's either bouncing from one area of the nursery to the other during the day, working on a home improvement project in the evenings during the week, or golfing on the weekends.

No one would ever say that Evan is a couch potato.

And it's this drive to always be doing something, to keep working to make things better, coming up with solutions to problems, that's elevated him during his young career.

Learning the benefits of labor

Evan wasn't one of those kids who spent his childhood in front of the TV playing video games; from an early age, he was working. His father was a grower for the local nursery, which was located right across the street from their house in Florida, so he was a frequent part-time "employee," helping out with crepe myrtle cuttings and other simple tasks.

When he turned 16, his parents bought him a lawnmower, which he used to start his own lawn care and landscaping business. Sure, he was used to a hard day's work by then, but Evan admitted that he wanted more money to buy the things every teenager wants—clothes and a car (in his case, a truck).

He worked mowing people's lawns up until high school graduation, and when he began his freshman year at Auburn University, he chose Agronomy as his major. But after realizing he would have to take a few chemistry classes—which wasn't in his wheelhouse—he switched to a Horticulture track with an emphasis in landscape horticulture.

He was well on his way to being in the landscape business until his junior year, when he took a Nursery Management class. That college course changed his life course.

“It was the best class I ever took,” recalls Evan. “In the beginning of the year, my professor said we had to create a full-blown business plan for a nursery or greenhouse operation that we could take to the bank and get a loan. And I had a blast building a nursery from scratch; it was really, really detailed and that kind of changed my mind to wanting to focus on the nursery side.”

Opportunity knocks

After finishing college, Evan interned for six months at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia, where the annual PGA Masters Tournament is played. From there, he moved back to Auburn for a management position at a small nursery, growing rootstock for a kiwi orchard operation outside of Auburn.

It was his first “real job,” with 12 people reporting to him, but the homecoming back to his college town didn’t turn out the way he hoped. His boss at the time micromanaged everything he did, Evan said, constantly looking over his shoulder, telling him he was doing everything wrong. He’d finally had enough and decided to go back home and back to the nursery where his dad still worked.

After about a month, the nursery’s fertilizer salesman mentioned that May Nursery in Havana, Florida, had a position open for a pest scout. Evan jumped at the chance to apply for the job.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like working with his dad—it’s just that he didn’t see himself living the small-town life forever. Evan’s hometown of Mayo has only 1,300 people; Havana is less than 30 minutes from Tallahassee, which is plenty big enough for him.

“Tallahassee is the capital of Florida, but it doesn’t have that big-city feel,” he said. “It’s big enough and I don’t have to drive 25 minutes to get to a grocery store like I did growing up.”

Hands-on problem-solver

After dealing with a boss who was always breathing down his neck, working for the May family was a breath of fresh air. On his first day on the job, he took a quick tour with one of the owners. By 10:00 a.m., they told him what they expected from him and sent him on his way. From there, and during the last three years as Head Grower and Pest Control & Irrigation Manager for May Nursery, Evan has been empowered to make decisions and run his team of 37-plus the way he wants to. He learned from his last job how NOT to be a supervisor.

“My grandmother always said, ‘It’s not a mistake if you learn from it,’ so the job I had in Auburn that was awful, I learned from it. I learned how to manage people, how to talk to them and treat them,” said Evan. “I like to give my staff the freedom to be hands-on and figure out other ways to do things. That’s how I manage people and that’s how I like to be managed.”

Evan has his hands full at the nursery: he’s in charge of the weeding and pruning crews; all chemical applications, plus ordering inventory; all of the irrigation systems; some spacing and deadheading; occasional potting; and perennial plant maintenance. May Nursery has a total of 250 acres of trees, shrubs and perennials that ship as far north as Maine and as far west as Ohio, so this is no small feat. But Evan doesn’t see responsibility as something to shy away from; he’s a head-on, hands-on type of guy.

“For me, the best way to solve a problem is to get out there and do it,” he said. “If we’re having an issue with not completing a task as fast as we would like, instead of trying to sit in the office and think about how to move people around, I’ll go out there and work with the crew to figure out a better way to get it done.”

Evan faces situations with one goal in mind: “I want to make things better,” he says. “I always want to know why we do things the way we do them. I try to learn something every day, either about the plants or the business. Being able to come up with new ideas or give a fresh perspective on things, looking at something with a fresh pair of eyes and just be willing to try new things.”

And that’s how Evan comes up with solutions to the challenges he faces on a daily basis at the nursery—something that Richard May, one of the owners, realized quickly.

“Evan has shown that he is capable of handling almost everything we throw at him,” Richard said when he nominated Evan for the Young Grower Award. “He works extremely hard and acts as if he has ownership in our farm. Evan is the kind of person that you could train to become the General Manager or President of a large nursery or greenhouse operation.”

One area where Evan is trying to get more interest from the other nursery managers is automation. As with every other growing operation, labor is a huge issue, so Evan said he’s been pushing them to look more closely at other options, like spacing forks, conveyor belts and automated potting machines.

“For us, it’s more quality [of labor] than anything else, getting people that want to come in and work,” said Evan. “It’s not an easy job and it’s hot and very tiring, so there aren’t a lot of people who want to come and do that. If I could space 10,000 plants with one person with a $50,000 robot versus a crew of 12 and you look at how much you’re paying per person with wages and insurance and worker’s comp … well, a $50,000 robot doesn’t seem that bad.”

Making time for tee

When he’s not at the nursery making sure everything is running smoothly, Evan can be found renovating old houses—buying fixer-uppers, flipping them and then selling them. He just bought, fixed and sold his first house and is currently looking for a second one.

Also, Evan plays A LOT of golf. He tries to get to the course two to three times a week, and as we were chatting for this article, he was in the car, driving six hours to play in a golf tournament.

Right now his handicap is an 8, which means he “can pretty much hang with anybody and I won’t embarrass myself,” he jokes. “It’s a frustrating game and I have a very unhealthy relationship with it, but I love it. It helps me get my mind off of things.”

Actually, Evan has found a way to leave his work problems at work. He said he’s good at shaking his worries off, which allows him to have a good work/life balance—he works hard, but he also values the time he has for himself to golf, fish and hang out with his friends.

For now, Evan is extremely content with where he is in his career. Eventually, he’d like to have his own growing business, but that’s a long-term goal. In the meantime, he wants to continue to succeed at May Nursery by earning more responsibilities, having more decision-making control and seeing the end results of all of his hard work.

“Riding around and seeing homes with the plants I grew, it’s very rewarding,” said Evan. “To me, it’s just the reward of seeing a small plant and taking it to a landscape and seeing how beautiful the finished product is … that’s what I love about horticulture.” **GT**