

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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A True Labor of Love

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Jolea Gress, co-founder of Green Earth Growers in Prior Lake, Minnesota, didn't pursue a horticulture degree in college. It wasn't that she wasn't interested in plants; they simply weren't a part of her young career plan. Although college didn't provide a horticulture education (she majored in natural resources), it was there she met her future business partner Jennifer Hotz.

"The first job I received was an interior plant maintenance position where I took care of plants in an office building," said Jolea. "It was here that I learned that I liked plants and should be working with them."

Pictured: Jennifer Hotz (left) and Jolea Gress (right), founders of Green Earth Growers in Prior Lake, Minnesota.

Over the years, Jolea had several jobs in the industry, including a position at century-old garden center Linder's, where she was exposed to both the wholesale and retail part of the industry.

However, it was the position at Green Fingers Farm that truly sparked her interest in growing. It was here that she met her soon-to-be mentor Gene Stark and learned about the wholesale plug operation and farming field crops. Jennifer also worked at the operation and began to learn the ins and outs of the business.

Four years later, Gene had decided to run another operation with his son. Before selling the business publicly, he approached Jolea to see if she would be interested in renting the space.

"I didn't have a job at that time," shared Jolea. "And I was trying to figure out the next step for my career and with that one phone call everything fell into place."

Immediately, Jolea called Jennifer, who was in Kenya at the time, and asked if she would consider being her business partner. Happily, Jennifer said yes.

It was 2004 and the two quickly learned that running their own business was extremely different than working in it.

“There were so many details that just seem to be a natural part of the greenhouse; little did we know that each one had a purpose,” said Jolea.

The greenhouse cat was the perfect example of this, whom they adopted as part of the initial business transaction. When he passed away during that first year, they made the decision not to replace him.

“We quickly realized why greenhouses have cats,” laughed Jolea. “Now, we have at least one cat, often more, roaming throughout our location.”

To keep their operation manageable, Green Earth Growers initially focused on the plug operation, which already had an established loyal customer base of wholesalers (garden centers and farmers) and fundraisers. Over the years, the business evolved from being grower-centric (making custom orders) to developing the retail portion of the business.

“We learned that to keep the business going financially, we needed to be making more money,” said Jolea, adding in 2012 they opened the retail location.

“We started off by throwing a friends-and-family plant sale,” said Jolea. “But as the demand continued to increase, we knew that we needed to do more.”

One of the challenges with their retail operation was Green Earth Growers took over a previously badly run location. To be successful, they needed to demonstrate that they were different from the previous owner.

Their sustainability initiatives are just one way that Green Earth Growers showcases they’re unique. This includes using fiber pots whenever possible and not using growth retardants.

“We try to grow in as friendly a way as possible, including using some integrated pest management and investing the time to learn more about natural ways of growing,” said Jolea.

In response to the growing demand for organic produce, Green Earth Growers also has a dedicated organic-certified greenhouse.

Currently, the retail operation is open seasonally from April through to July, and then once a week to sell off finished produce and cut flowers. “It is still very much a work in progress,” said Jolea.

Their produce is sold in their retail store, farmers market and to their CSA customers.

“Currently our CSA is fairly small, about 70 families, but that’s the right size for our operation,” said Jolea.

Cut flowers are Jolea’s newest passion. “I initially started with experimenting with a few flowers and instantly fell in love,” said Jolea. Now, Green Earth Growers dedicates just under 2 acres for cut flowers, which are sold in the retail store and through a 10-week flower share. Green Earth Growers are also actively involved with the Twin Cities Flower Exchange, which sells locally grown products to designers and florists.

Upon reflection of their operation, Jolea shared that she continues to be shocked by how far they’ve come. “We are just a small little greenhouse carving a niche in the way that we grow and the methods that we grow,” said Jolea. “Because we do so much, people often think that we are bigger than we are.”

Green Earth Growers added their first full-time employee, Linnea-Fink Bittner, to their operation to run the retail store and help with various projects throughout the year. The business is primarily run by the three of them, with some seasonal help during the busy season.

When asked how they get everything done, Jolea modestly stated that they know the routine and stick with it—from

the frantic pace of the greenhouse and retail store in the spring to the cleanup and repair in the fall. The two owners love the change of pace that's an intrinsic part of owning a horticulture business.

"By the time you get tired of one area, it changes and you get to do something else," said Jolea. "We go from the greenhouse to the field and then back to the greenhouse again for repairs and to start all over again."

Having supportive families also helps, including Jolea's father Jim, retired veteran and engineer who enjoys coming out to provide suggestions and help with repairs.

When asked if she had any words of advice to future growers, Jolea quickly shared that it must be a labor of love, where you work hard while also developing a strong, supportive community.

"I learn the most by working with people and observing others," said Jolea. "We have a few great individuals that I can call when I have questions. Building those resources and contacts can really help your business grow." **GT**

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