

GROWERTALKS

Features

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From Beets to Baskets

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The state of Virginia is steeped in history. It hosts the site of one of the original colonies founded by Captain John Smith in 1607 (named Jamestown after the King of England). Benedict Arnold famously turned on the American Revolution, attacking the capital of Richmond and burning part of the city to the ground. Its land also served as the grounds for many Civil War battles, including the Battle of Fredericksburg, when General Ambrose Burnside's Union army was decimated by the Confederates led by General Robert E. Lee.

So it wasn't hard to find a growing operation that has its own interesting history with deep Virginia roots.

Pictured: Top: Beverley and Harry Crosby flank their daughter Maggie Edwards, who helps to run the ornamentals side of Cros-B-Crest Farm in Staunton, Virginia. Shown as a baby bump is the next generation of Crosbys, Walter Martin Edwards, who was not yet born when this picture was taken. He was born August 7, 2018.

Cros-B-Crest Farm, located in Staunton—about 45 minutes west of Charlottesville—credits its beginnings to Harry Crosby's great-grandfather, who came to manage the farm in 1894. Since then, it's seen many transformations.

The unique name for the farm is a blend of "Cros" for Crosby and "Crest" because the farm sits on the crest of a hill. Back when the Crosbys started the farm, they were growing sugar beets ... "which didn't really work out," laughed Harry, so the family turned it into an orchard. After a while, Harry's grandfather and father cleared the orchard trees out to make room for field crops and livestock.

It was during this time in the 1960s when Harry's Great-Aunt Minerva had a hobby greenhouse built, where she could grow annuals, perennials and hothouse tomatoes on the days she wasn't at her job as the local school secretary. Minerva grew ferns for their church and became an active member of the garden club.



The small glass-and-cinder block greenhouse was still in operation in 1986 when Harry became involved in his family's business and his new bride Beverley started becoming passionate about perennials, annuals and shrubs. "We did it all in the beginning and very quickly realized what not to do," she joked.

Pictured: When Cros-B-Crest was just a field crop and livestock farm, Harry's Great-Aunt Minerva opened the door to adding ornamentals to the business when she had a hobby greenhouse built on the property.

Beverley soon turned her passion into sales, and upon realizing the potential of growing, she, Harry and her father-in-law decided to build another, more modern, greenhouse and a few Quonsets so that she could grow perennials full time and sell them to the public.

Since then, Harry and Beverley have added on to their business—and family—four times: building four greenhouse additions to grow plants wholesale and having four children, two of which have become the next generation of Crosbys to help run the company.

Today, Cros-B-Crest Farm sells ornamentals (annuals, perennials, mums, poinsettias) to IGC customers, not just in Virginia, but also into Maryland, West Virginia and North Carolina. They used to have a retail store open to the public, but decided to close it in 2010 to make room for more production space. "We were 80% wholesale anyway," said Maggie Edwards, Harry and Beverley's daughter.

During the last few years, the Crosbys said that they've started to shift toward more "premium items," like vegetative varieties for high-end containers and baskets. At just over 76,000 sq. ft., Cros-B-Crest is sized to have the luxury of offering a wide variety of plants and allows them to take more risks when it comes to trying something new, whether crop or program. Beverley said that they make sure to get out and attend multiple trade shows so that they can keep the new ideas flowing.



Although this article's focus is on the ornamentals side of Cros-B-Crest, which Maggie runs, Harry and Beverley's son Jimmy manages the field crops and poultry business. The Crosbys have 460 acres of wheat, corn and soybeans, plus two chicken houses where they sell 9-lb. whole birds. But 75% of their total business is made up of what they grow in the greenhouses. (The other two Crosby sons, Bill and Aaron, worked on the farm growing up, but now have careers in other industries.) They also sell a bit to landscapers, as well.

Pictured: During the last few years, Cros-B-Crest has been focusing on offering more premium-priced items, like these hanging baskets.

As mentioned before, the Crosbys aren't afraid to implement new technology. Cros-B-Crest Farm has two sets of solar arrays—both poultry houses and a grain facility run with 50kW solar panels, and they just installed 80kW panels in December for all four greenhouses. When I stopped by for a visit last spring, Harry said about 75% of their power was coming from these solar panels, and with the new 80kW ones, his hope is that number will eventually be

close to 100%.

As for Great Aunt Minerva's greenhouse that started their foray into ornamentals, the Crosbys stopped growing in it a few years back and have started with some small renovations to at least keep it viable as a storage and overflow area. This little glass greenhouse is a testament to the fact that the Crosby family still honors the history of their business, but that they're not afraid to change with the times and technology—a recipe for a successful multi-generation operation. **GT**