

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Embracing the Virtues of the Artist Lifestyle

Anne-Marie Hardie



Stan Miklis—owner of Caliper Farm to Market in Union Valley, Texas—was destined to create his own path in life. An artist at heart, he diligently carved out his own career in horticulture, bringing beautiful flowers to his local community. His career wasn't directed by financial goals, but governed by his love for plants.

Pictured: Stan Miklis, owner of Caliper Farm to Market, with Sarah Parry, one of the founders of the Good Local market where Stan sells his products.

From a fairly young age, Stan could be found working alongside his father nurturing the gardens on the property. He described how his father would spend the day diligently working with the plants to create an immaculate landscape. In fact, it was his father's dedication to gardening that inspired Stan to pursue a career in horticulture. His father sparked a passion; now Stan wanted the education to transform that passion into a livelihood, so he attended a vocational high school that was followed by a horticulture degree at the university.

After graduation, he completed several internships, including at Green Lake Nursery in Seagoville, Texas, and Monrovia in California. It was through these experiences that he acquired both the hands-on experience, and a glance into the challenges and benefits of working in large scale operations.

"I didn't want to continue to work in the corporate world," said Stan. "I desired to be independent from the constraints that corporations had."

With a clear vision on what he wanted his career to look like, Stan immediately began to put his plan into motion. His product of choice was caliper trees, however, it didn't take long to realize that running a start-up operation that was exclusively focused on large trees was financially challenging.

"The payoff for trees is five to 10 years away; compare that to herbs, where the payoff is within three weeks," said Stan. "I knew that in order to make the business sustainable something had to change."

So Stan shifted his focus toward flowers and herbs. Although, he altered his operation to more financially lucrative products, the name of the company, Caliper Farm to Market, remained.

During those first few years, Stan attempted to balance being both a sales representative and developing a start-up company.

“At the time, there were no box stores,” recalled Stan. “Just independent garden centers, most of whom I became close friends with.”

He took the leap to become fully independent the year that his first child was born. Although he admits that the timing was far from ideal, the desire to be an independent business person was so strong that he knew he could no longer work for someone else.

“At times, we did not have enough money to make ends meet,” said Stan. In fact, he described the initial 10 years as incredibly challenging, with most of the incoming money being directed right back into the business.

“If you’re married, it is so important that your spouse is equally committed to the venture,” he said. “It is very difficult for couples to make it in this business, and over the years, I’ve seen a lot of hardship among young couples who struggle with the financial and time commitment to running this type of operation.”

Despite the financial challenges, he persevered, knowing that he was finally on the path to seeing his dream become a reality.

As Stan continued to venture into herbs and flowers, he began to discover a new niche: unique and exotic plants. In fact, it didn’t take long for Stan to become known as the exotic plant expert.

“I introduced our Texas market to so many new flowers,” said Stan. “I love the different and unusual plants. I was probably one of the first to introduce our region to several flowers, including the exotic passion flower, which I initially brought to the local farmers market nearly 30 years ago.”

In fact, bougainvillea hanging baskets were one of the first things that Stan sold in the retail market.

“I love not only watching things grow, but the nurturing aspect of horticulture,” said Stan. “Nurses, nursery school workers and horticulturists—what we have in common is that we nurture. We take care of things until they are able to take care of themselves.”

Over the years, the company expanded in response to the increased demand for this product. This included the additional challenge of not only hiring employees, but finding ones that embodied his hard work and dedication to horticulture.

Today, Stan has scaled back his business significantly, returning to a one-man operation. Although the downsize was initially a direct result from the gentrification in the region, he’s enjoying his semi-retired lifestyle.

“When you hand-water a 3,000-square foot herb garden, it is akin to spending an hour in aromatherapy,” said Stan. Each weekend, he can be found at the local farmer markets bringing his lovingly nurtured plants to his customers.

“I want to die an old man selling flowers in the farmers market,” said Stan. “I love being out in public talking about my plants and my passion.”

When asked about what he would advise to those pursuing a career in horticulture, he quickly emphasized that this is a career that cannot be exclusively focused on the money.

“Financial success may come if you’re provided with enough time and financial resources,” said Stan. However, Stan believes that the true success can only happen when you’re pursuing your passion.

“I love what I’m doing,” said Stan. “I live like an artist; I don’t do it for money, and since I’m not focused on money, I don’t have many stressors.”

His hope is that the future generation looks towards horticulture—not for the money—but for the passion, art and beauty of the career. **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.