

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

2/1/2020

After the Storm

Anne-Marie Hardie



The story of North Haven Gardens is one of passion, resiliency and perseverance. Over the past seven decades, this third-generation family business has experienced times of extreme success and massive devastation. However, a dedication to both their business and their community has helped ensure that this business not only thrived, but survived.

This past October, North Haven Gardens in Dallas, Texas, was decimated by a tornado. The large trees that surrounded the 69-year-old business had vanished, the greenhouses, offices, café and gallery had become rubble. Only one building was left standing. But despite this vast devastation, Jon Pinkus, president and second generation of this family-owned and operated business, was determined that North Haven Gardens would rise again.

Pictured: Brioux Turner, one of North Haven Gardens' longest-tenured and most talented garden advisors, restocking herbs during the rebuild.

Over the decades, the business became not only a staple for gardening supplies, but a trusted resource and a beautiful space to while away an afternoon. When news spread of the tragedy, community members immediately reached out, sharing both their love and support.

The employees tirelessly worked together, clearing debris and salvaging whatever products survived. Just a couple weeks after the tornado, North Haven Gardens held a weekend sale where the surviving plants from the tornado were sold. The community came out in droves to support the business, sharing their stories and taking a moment to connect with the employees and each other. Despite the structures being virtually flattened, the message was clear: North Haven Gardens will rebuild and continue to be a part of the community.

This moment demonstrated that North Haven Gardens is not just any business; it's a vital part of the community, with a team of employees and owners that are incredibly resilient.

Now in its third generation, the story of North Haven Gardens began in 1951, when founder Ralph Pinkus and his wife Muriel moved from Guatemala where Ralph had been growing cinchona trees for its quinine, to Dallas, Texas.

The couple purchased 9 acres of property slightly north of the city and began selling retail plants to customers who made the journey outside of town.

“Ralph took care of his plants like he took care of his children—with lots of care and love,” shared Cody Hoya, general manager. “He loved discovering new plants and introducing these findings to his customers, including varieties of lantana, mandevilla and acalypha.”



Ralph became known as the individual who transformed the Texas landscape, demonstrating the vast array of plants that thrived in this region.

Pictured: North Haven Gardens circa 1959.

The '70s was a period of growth for the family, with their sons Jon and David joining the business, while Ralph continued to be an advocate and a leader in the Texas gardening community, working with the North Dallas Chamber of Commerce and the City of Dallas Park Department to create an arboretum and botanical garden that showcased the potential of growing in North Texas. He also began Tawakoni Plant Farm in Lake Tawakoni, Texas, providing a space where Ralph could grow trees and shrubs for the retail and landscape clients.

There were hard times ahead, as the company struggled to survive the harsh economic climate in the late '80s. Three sets of business consultants advised that the family close the business and pursue other interests. David decided to leave the business to pursue other interests, while Jon stayed to focus on both the retail and wholesale operations.

Jon, with his wife Lillian at his side, was financially and emotionally invested in the business. The couple streamlined all expenses, focusing only on those aspects that would enhance the customer experience. In the advent of the box store, the couple realized they needed to stop trying to compete with prices, but instead focus on continually delivering the highest quality product and service to their customers. Just four years later, in 1996, the company was not only debt-free, but once again profitable.

Jon and Lillian's son Aaron joined the industry in 2003 as vice president of Nortex Wholesale Nursery—the family's wholesale business. Four years later, he introduced Blue Label Herbs to retailer customers (including North Haven Gardens), providing home gardeners with the opportunity to grow their fresh herbs.



Pictured: In October 2019, a tornado wiped out all of North Haven Gardens except one building.

With the desire to continue to offer a beautiful space for the community, the Pinkus family added both a gallery and café to their retail outlet. The gallery, which typically rotates artwork every two months, showcased local, state and national artists that have developed pieces based on nature or gardening.

Committed to the environment, North Haven Gardens offers its customers a variety of tools that can aid them with their own organic gardening ventures. As a direct result, they've become a destination garden center for edible produce gardeners and for those customers who are seeking out sustainable solutions for the landscape, including native and well-adapted plants for their region.

“We host several monthly meetings for our local plant and gardening clubs and organizations, including a full calendar of free and paid classes and workshops throughout the year,” said Cody.

During their rebuilding process and temporary closure this past fall after the tornado, North Haven Gardens

announced that they were available for speaking engagements and to share their knowledge of gardening with community groups and garden clubs.

In just under four weeks, the dedicated team of employees cleared the debris and set up a temporary shop, providing a space for their loyal customers to enjoy their annual holiday shopping experience. In addition to their standard holiday offerings, Jon invited the community to come in and name the Christmas trees, shop and write letters to Santa. The message was clear that they wouldn't be held back by the damage, but instead would persevere.

The story of North Haven Gardens is one of overcoming obstacles, demonstrating that the heart of a business isn't in its structure, but in the people who bring the operation to life. **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.