

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

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### A Strategic Approach to Designing a Business

*Anne-Marie Hardie*

When scientist Dr. Emily Gogol, CEO of Infinite Tree, and her spouse Ryan Burns told their family they were leaving their current career paths to start a farm, there was some concern. Neither partner had ever tackled the world of horticulture before; however, they saw an opportunity to change their professional lives dramatically and took it.

Located in Grants Pass, Oregon, Infinite Tree is a hemp nursery and consultant service providing information, research and seedlings to growers.

*Pictured: Emily Gogol and Ryan Burns, owners of Infinite Tree, continuing their education and getting inspiration at the San Antonio Botanical Garden in Texas.*



Emily adopted a scientific approach to their new venture, continually questioning and evaluating the best path to take.

"I spent my first part of my career completing my Ph.D. in the medical field, developing new medicine and basic research on diseases," she explained. This experience helped shape how she interacts with the world and has resulted in a nursery operation that's highly focused on research and development.

Ryan's extensive background in technology has been vital in developing the right infrastructure for their nursery. It's the perfect complement to Emily's skillset, as he integrates the scientific research to design and implements the best growing environment for these plants.

Fatigued by the intensive demand in the tech industry, Ryan was eager to steer towards a different career path. Emily was also seeking to do more with her career, but was uncertain what would be the best fit.

"We both felt compelled to do something different with our lives," said Emily. "And we knew that no matter what it was, we wanted to work together."

It all came together when the couple decided to take a vacation and visit their cousins who lived in South Oregon. As

part of their getaway, Ryan assisted on the farm. His mind immediately began churning about the potential for integrating this type of work into their lives.

“He moved goats from one pasture to another, worked on farm equipment and learned about what was happening in the region,” said Emily.

They wanted to work in an area where they were able to apply both of their unique skillsets; hemp seemed the natural solution.

“We had family that lived in Oregon; we knew the community and hemp had just been legalized,” said Emily. “It was an extremely exciting industry, both from a research perspective and a business.”

Although the couple loved the farm experience, they decided that it wasn’t the right business model for them. Instead, they began to research flower production, extraction and nursery management.

“At the end of the day, we chose nursery because the research aspect appealed to us,” said Emily. “We wanted to be able to discover the plants, conduct research, collaborate the data and offer these resources to others.”

The couple researched breeding programs and quickly identified that this was the area of the industry that held the most appeal. Their journey began with purchasing a run-down farm and fully rehabilitating it.

“It had trash everywhere—old equipment laying in the fields (including an irrigation system) and it was overgrazed,” said Emily.

Although their primary business would be in seedlings and seed, they decided to rehabilitate the farm in case they decided to expand their venture. Infinite Tree received their USDA Organic Farm Certification in the fall of 2019.

Their goal for the company was not just to sell plants, but to make sure that their clients understood their commitment to science and research.

“We want to continually work towards growing a better product. Certifications are simply one way to do this,” said Emily.

They approached their new business strategically, with a strong focus on relationship building in the initial year. The first year involved attending conferences, connecting with other breeders and researching the field to help determine the varieties of hemp that they wanted to carry.

“We tried to find folks that were similar-minded and applied a rigorous approach to research and development,” said Emily.

To help determine which seeds to carry, Infinite Tree has established trial gardens with tested material from over 200 different breeders. The results from these field trials determine which varieties they’ll carry the following season.

“It is intensely focused on the research/science element where we collaborate with breeders to determine the best products for the market,” Emily shared.

Infinite Tree prides itself as being lean and nimble. This includes integrating sensing technology and minimal investments in the infrastructure. And Ryan’s expertise in technology has helped design the ideal growing environment for the hemp seedlings. This includes developing a monitoring system and maintaining different zones to support the growth of the plants.

When seeking out employees to support their business, Dana Kibodeaux and Cody Barker were the perfect fit. Their nursery expertise has played an integral role in the success of their operation.

However, the hemp industry hasn’t been without its hurdles.

“It’s been a rough year for so many farmers,” shared Emily. “There was a massive disconnect between what was being grown, produced and sold.”

At the same time, the industry has resulted in several brand new players without a robust supply chain to sustain it. This challenge was compounded by a huge price drop, from \$3.00 to \$6.00 per seedling last year to 75 cents a seedling this year, making it economically unsustainable for many growers.

To help combat these challenges, Infinite Tree decided to enter the retail space (in those states where hemp is legal). On May 5, they launched their retail brand Grow It From Home, which supplies backyard farmers with their own plants.

“It is how we supplemented our business this year, embracing the DIY at home, self-sufficiency movement by introducing gardeners to the world of hemp,” said Emily. “It’s exciting; I love giving them quality plants that they can then use for their own tea or salve.”

They continue to adopt a scientific approach to growing, including planting all material in organic soil and observing the various plants at every stage of development. It’s about looking at both the system as a whole and the individual parts to determine the most efficient solution. **GT**

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