

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

1/1/2021

### A Business Shaped by Three Generations

Anne-Marie Hardie



The story of The Rhoads Garden began in 1939 when founder Walter Rhoads and his business partner (and best friend) William Lukens decided to venture into the cut flower industry.

In true entrepreneurial spirit, they tirelessly worked away at their budding business, rotating shifts—Walter in the evening and William during the day—while also maintaining their full-time jobs.

*Pictured: The Rhoads Garden started off as a wholesale cut flower operation, but has since evolved to include a retail nursery and greenhouse.*

Neither had any previous horticulture experience, but they had a passion for growing and quickly learned the best cut flowers to grow for their Pennsylvania wholesale market.

“They grew snapdragons, stocks, mums and cold-weather cut flowers, which they sold to local florists,” shared Walter’s son and co-owner of The Rhoads Garden, Tom Rhoads. They expanded into produce, selling tomatoes and eventually other vegetables at a roadside stand in North Wales, Pennsylvania. The response was extremely positive, motivating the two partners to open up a small retail store, Lukens and Rhoads, in 1963. The store, which included both nursery and bedding plants, introduced their community to their high-quality products.

William passed away in 1969, leaving Walter as the sole owner of the operation. Walter reached out to his sons, Tom and Dave, to assist him in his company’s day-to-day operations. This opportunity allowed both sons to apply the skills they learned in their education—Tom in urban planning and Dave in horticulture—while also being guided by their father.

“One thing that our father taught us is that quality will always sell,” said Tom. “We are extremely quality-oriented and refuse to compromise for price.”

Walter also stressed that when it comes to plants, you can’t have your favorites. Although he doesn’t have a favorite plant, Tom shared that he continues to be impressed about how the varieties evolve and improve over the years.

The company officially became The Rhoads Garden in 1974. The name change reflected the evolution of the company, shifting from a partnership to a family operation. Walter passed away in 1992, leaving his legacy to his two sons and hoping that the business would carry forward for generations to come.

“Family businesses are tough,” stated Tom. “You will not agree on everything, but you need to be able to put any personal conflicts aside and focus on the business.”

Tom said the continued success of The Rhoads Garden, now nearing its 75th year, is due to his family’s ability to work together, including recognizing the strengths of each individual.

Over the years, The Rhoads Garden has had several evolutions, including adding a gift shop, foliage house, and retail greenhouse and nursery. The pinnacle year was 2007, when a significant renovation and new design was implemented to reflect its future aspirations and incorporate ideas from the third generation. This included adding an extensive gift shop, baby boutique and a large floral shop, nearly double the original size.

Tom shared that their father had always dreamed of having a beautiful floral shop in his retail space and the renovation presented the opportunity to bring this dream to life. The design incorporated the insights and expertise of online Floral Marketplace BloomNation to ensure that this vast space supported the needs and wants of today’s clientele.

“BloomNation was there to help us out with this process, providing us with the guidance and support to develop a successful flower shop,” said Tom.

Today, The Rhoads Garden has approximately 8,000 sq. ft. of production greenhouses. They continue to grow most of their live products, including their nursery stock, which they purchase small and then grow for the retail industry.

“We are 100% retail now, with a nursery, garden center, production greenhouse, gift, wedding and flower shop,” said Tom. “We are extremely diversified.”

This diversification is partly due to the entry of the third generation into the fold, who’ve applied their education and interest to develop The Rhoads Garden into a shopping destination.

There’s no question that this past year has been a challenging one for the industry, requiring significant shifts in operation. For The Rhoads Garden, this included adding curbside pickup, increasing deliveries and re-allocating staff to the areas that needed the most support. They also added vegetables and herbs to their lineup to ensure that they’d be deemed an essential service and remain open.

“This year showed the resiliency and strength in all of our employees,” Tom said. “It was amazing how everyone worked together to get the job done; nobody complained, they just buckled down and did their job.”

This included having five separate landscape crews that went out throughout the year to ensure that their customers received their plants.

“Our retail shop was closed during Mother’s Day, but our flower shop was open and we did over 300 deliveries,” said Tom. “It was stressful—we had seven delivery people out that day, but every order was delivered and we more than doubled our sales from the previous year.”

When asked what advice he would give to others contemplating entering the industry, Tom stressed that you need to be prepared for a lot of hard work.

“If you’re new to the industry, make sure to hire somebody that really knows the nursery business,” said Tom. “If we

need to get it done, we put the hours in and get it done—that's just the nature of the industry.”

The company is now slowly transitioning the third generation into leadership roles, with David Rhoads, Jr., Tom's nephew, who manages the nursery; Tom's niece, Dianne Rhoads-Esbensen, who manages the office; and Tom's daughter, Lauren Rhoads-Hales, who's both the gift shop manager and buyer.

“I am in my 70s and my brother is in his 60s—we are looking forward to watching how the next generation, our children, continue to grow this

business.” **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.*