

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Filling the Gaps

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There are moments in life that redefine our direction. For Seth Rhodes, it was a job at Rockledge Gardens and a shortage of houseplants during the onset of the pandemic.

Pictured: Seth Rhodes, owner of Rhodes Roots, showing off some of his houseplant varieties.

Four and half years ago, Seth accepted an entry-level position loading products into customers' vehicles at Rockledge Gardens in Rockledge, Florida. This position introduced him to horticulture, motivating him to change his major and eventually alter his entire career path.

"I quickly fell in love with the entire industry, but specifically the aspects of growing and propagation," said Seth. "That was what eventually drew me to opening my own growing operation."

Today, Seth is the staff and customer service manager at Rockledge Gardens, owner/operator of Rhodes Roots, and a horticulture instructor at Eastern Florida State College.

He takes his multiple roles in stride, enthusiastically sharing the symbiotic nature of the relationships he's formed and how each part of his career puzzle seamlessly fits together.

"Seth's work ethic and commitment to excellence are astounding," said colleague Liz Lark Riley of Rockledge Gardens. "He is committed to ensuring the team he leads at Rockledge Gardens is supported and the guests are taken care of. In many ways, he is the heart and soul of the team."

A quick conversation with Seth reveals that he isn't an individual to sit idly by. Instead, he's a problem-solver, immediately identifying gaps and implementing solutions. The creation of Rhodes Roots embodies this principle, as he initially developed the company to respond to the plant shortage at the onset of the pandemic.

"The availability of houseplants was becoming slim, and it was stuff that I knew that I could grow and supply pretty steadily to Rockledge Gardens," said Seth.

He shared his idea with the owners of Rockledge Gardens, who fully supported him in developing his own business, including providing him with the land to start his operation.

The land was the original location for Rockledge Gardens' growing operation, a division they'd closed approximately 20 years ago, but retained the property. Seth immediately delved into his new project, cleaning up the property, stripping down the existing greenhouses to their frames, and adding new plastic and irrigation.

"I did most of the clean-up on my own to get the greenhouses up and running again, including setting up the tables and the irrigation," he said.

Rhodes Roots began with a crop of blueberries, but it didn't take long for Seth to expand his products to include a variety of unique houseplants, which were mainly grown from cuttings from Seth's collection.

"In a very short time, Seth has grown a selection of plants that have been challenging for Rockledge Gardens to find from other growers," said Liz. "It is clear from the quality of his plants that he cares deeply about growing."

Today, he's diversified his operation to also include fruit plants and hard-to-find native plants, both areas of horticulture that Seth finds extremely rewarding to grow.

The property currently consists of four greenhouses; the two larger greenhouses are used for production and to house the mother plants, while the smaller two are for native plants, specifically Florida native milkweed.

"Both Rockledge Gardens and I are very passionate about protecting the environment and the Florida wildlife," stated Seth. "With the two greenhouses, I can produce between four to five thousand milkweed plants every two months."

It isn't uncommon for Seth to work 12 hours a day during the busy season, fitting in Rhodes Roots before and after his shift at Rockledge.

"I'm lucky that Rhodes Roots is located literally across Rockledge Gardens, making it easier to balance the two roles and maintain the health of the plants," he said.

One aspect of his operation that he's enjoyed is bringing new products into the region, but with those new products comes the challenge of discovering their ideal environment. He's learned that the horticulture journey is one of trial-and-error.

"There were several times where I found myself trying a variety of things—water, soil, fertilizers, lighting—to solve a challenge with one of my plants," said Seth. "It's so important not to be afraid to try new things and to not let setbacks stop you."

The owners of Rockledge Gardens have been supportive throughout the entire process, taking on the role of both advisor and primary customer.

"I may be the only person working in the business, but I definitely have a lot of support from other people, and Rockledge Gardens is always willing to help anytime that I ask," said Seth.

One example of his supportive network occurred this past March when Rhodes Roots received a delivery of 3,000 seedlings whose root balls were exceptionally small, less than a cubic centimeter, and were at risk of dying if they weren't repotted quickly. He immediately sent out an email to Rockledge Gardens, resulting in 12 people responding and helping him plant the seedlings in a few hours.

One of his coworkers, Amanda Rose Newton, who's been an invaluable resource for Seth's plant biology and entomology questions, also runs the horticulture program at Eastern Florida State College. She's helped foster a relationship between Rhodes Roots and the college.

Currently, Seth instructs two of the program's classes—Horticulture 2, and Greenhouse and Nursery Operations—on-site at Rhodes Roots, providing a hands-on experience for the students. The internship process began slowly, initially with only one intern, but today, the class size has expanded to an average of nine students per semester.

“The students come out to Rhodes Roots where I will teach various aspects of the operational side of the business, ranging from marketing to methods of propagation,” said Seth. “They will then spend time working directly with the plants, assisting with whatever aspect needs to be done on that day.”

A young grower himself, Seth is helping nurture the next generation of growers by demonstrating the opportunities that exist in the industry.

He’s also passionate about protecting the environment, which includes sharing his knowledge about the negative impacts of excessive pesticide and fertilizer use with his interns and the community.

“As a grower, it’s so important to be sustainable and protect the world that we live in,” said Seth.

Although only two years into his business, Rhodes Roots has grown quickly, expanding to meet the demand of his local region. Goals for the future include building an industrial-sized greenhouse equipped with climate and humidity control to create different growing seasons and cultivating noninvasive houseplants, fruit trees and native plants for local retailers. **GT**

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