

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Always Growing & Evolving

Jennifer Zurko



Jenni Hernandez's Ball Seed sales rep Nate King told her she shouldn't think of herself as "a small grower." If she compares her wholesale growing business to, say, Young's Plant Farm (a large wholesaler an hour and a half away in Alabama), then, yeah, she's small. But Jenni and her sister Julie have grown their business exactly the way they want it.

"We are independent growers and have the freedom to serve our customers with a great product line," explained Jenni. "We love our work and the industry we

work in."

Pictured: Flintwood Farms has a wide selection of popular annuals in 5-in. and premium hanging baskets.

Jenni and Julie are the third-generation owners of Flintwood Farms in Fayetteville, Georgia, just south of Atlanta. They grew up in the dairy business when it was established in 1955 and the two sisters transitioned to growing annuals when their parents retired. While they still maintain a beef herd and sheep on the larger part of the property, their vision for the farm is taking a fresh look at the 342-acre site and its growing facilities that cater to landscaper professionals and IGCs.

In 2010, they made the move to grow their spring crop in 5-in. eight-count trays across the board. This change is what catapulted the business into a higher quality. Jenni said they're sharing their experiences planting landscape beds with a more efficient process that uses less plants in the ground, but overall better performance in the end.

Flintwood Farms has developed systems for their customers to simplify the ordering process that follows through the job to plant distribution on the landscapers' properties. Because of this support, they've developed great relationships and a very loyal customer base.

For IGCs, which is a growing segment of their customer base, they provide a wide variety of annuals, hanging baskets and potted combinations, both annual color and shade foliage combos. Jenni said their retail customers trust them with a budget and allow Flintwood Farms to formulate orders that quickly move off their retail shelves.



Pictured: Jenni's sister Julie designs many of their custom baskets, like these foliage ones that have been in high demand.

Jenni admitted they'd love to do more custom baskets, but in many ways, their business is very traditional where they still do a lot of planting by hand. She and Julie have been slowly incorporating more automation into their production, but rely on efficient systems and scheduling to get the job done.

As they continue to grow and face daily challenges with expansion permitting, supply chain and sourcing labor,

the sisters remain optimistic.

"We're going to get through it," said Jenni. "There is always a solution."

Spring outlook

When I paid a visit to Flintwood Farms it was the last week of April when their spring was just springing. With the late change in weather, Jenni and Julie have had their share of challenges this year. But their product looked amazing and they were looking forward to spring.

They're also working on solutions for their major pain point—labor. Jenni said that they were in the process of getting workers through H-2A and preparing housing for them, which is one of the requirements to use the program. They've been working with AgWorks H2 and Jennie said they've been very helpful through the whole process.

"We just can't get people to show up for work on time and work a full day," she said. "I'm hopeful H-2A will serve us well. We are looking forward to the change."

In order to make sure they have everything they need for next spring, Jenni said raw material orders for 2023 have already been placed and plant scheduling is in the process.

"We are aware of continued price increases from every segment of the industry," she said.



As with many growing businesses, Flintwood Farms raised their prices this year and expects to continue to evaluate and adjust costs again next year. But Jenni gives her customers a good reason to buy from her.

"We don't grow the old standards," she explained. "We travel to regional trial gardens, plant new products on our farm and grow new genetics that work in our southern region. We aim for the toughest, longest-lasting performers that we can count on for our clientele."

Pictured: Flintwood Farms doesn't grow "the old standards"—they grow many of the newer genetics that work well in the south, like Blue My Mind Evolvulus from Proven Winners.

Jenni said they used to have a small retail area on-site, but they closed it last fall to concentrate solely on their wholesale business. It was getting too much to balance both at the growing facility.

"We couldn't maintain a clear division of wholesale and retail areas, and felt our time was better served focusing on the bigger picture," she explained.

Future outlook

Jenni said that simplifying their customer base has been a good decision, and helps her and Julie focus on the future.

"Sometimes simple is better. We're going back to doing what brought us to the dance," she said. "We're going back to doing what we love to do instead of being something for everybody."



Pictured: Flintwood Farms' outdoor production.

Jenni and Julie are currently working on a succession plan for Flintwood Farms for the fourth generation. Jenni has a son graduating high school this year and a daughter in college, and both are starting to show an interest in being a part of the business. But she's not pressuring them.

"We want to transition something that's in their heart," said Jenni. "It takes time."

Julie's son is currently developing a promising real estate portfolio and gaining valuable experience that will be integral as they develop the final reveal of their vision for the overall property.

As Flintwood Farms moves forward, Jenni and Julie said they'll continue to evolve and finesse the parts that need smoothing out. Their optimism and solution-minded attitudes are good attributes to have in order to do that.

"We love this industry and we've made a good living," Jenni said. "We're feeling good about the spring and our future vision for our business." **GT**