

# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

11/1/2022

## The Perfect Partnership

*Anne-Marie Hardie*



A career in horticulture requires resiliency, adaptation and foresight, especially if you've chosen a new sector like cannabis. Naturally, there's a degree of uncertainty when the new commodity attempts to establish its roots. However, finding the right partners can help bring that dream to fruition.

Family-owned and women-operated, Autumn Brands is located on the coast of Santa Barbara County, California, benefitting from bright sunshine and a coastal breeze. The property, which was originally a cut flower operation, consists of seven greenhouses, three of which are leased to medicinal cannabis.

Autumn Shelton, partner and chief financial officer, is not one to shy away from challenges. She began her career managing foreclosed properties and quickly discovered that she enjoyed cost analysis, particularly when tackling challenging markets and finding their potential.

*Pictured: The team at Autumn Brands (clockwise from top left): Johnny Brand, Hanna Brand, Hans Brand and Autumn Shelton.*

Her entry into horticulture began with a discussion with Hans Brand, chief executive officer and partner of Autumn Brands.

"He was just coming out of foreclosure with his cut flower business and needed someone to help bring it back to being profitable," said Autumn.

Intrigued by this new area, she took on the role of financial controller and began peeling back at the operations to find potential sources of revenue. During this time, Autumn was approached with an opportunity to rent out some of the greenhouse space for medical marijuana.

"After a lot of risk assessment, I convinced him to do it," said Autumn.

Although they weren't working directly with this new product, both Autumn and Hans began to consider if they were in the right market.

Thriving in cut flowers was becoming increasingly challenging to remain competitive and profitable, especially with the influx of imported cut flower products. This recognition led both Hans and Autumn to consider alternative business opportunities, eventually leading them to cannabis.

“At the time, it was much more lucrative to get into cannabis, but it was very risky,” said Autumn. However, it was a sector that had extreme growth potential presenting an opportunity for not only Hans and Autumn to enter the business, but also for their families.

It was the perfect partnership, as Hans could apply his extensive knowledge to growing this new crop and Autumn could invest her time in compliance and finances.

“My husband, Abe, brought his knowledge of the industry and marketing,” said Autumn. “While Hans’ children, Johnny and Hanna, brought in all these fresh ideas. It’s this perfect team that brings together two families (and their skillsets) to own and operate this business.”

Initially, the company converted three of four greenhouses (4 acres in total) to cannabis, retaining one with cut flowers, as Autumn Brands explored its new market. However, the cut flower leg of their business continued to struggle, affirming that making the switch was the right move. This year will be the first year that they’ll grow cannabis in the fourth greenhouse, adding 1.5 acres to their operation.

“We literally just changed over the crop. We grow in the same 3-liter pots and the same systems that we had in the cut flower business,” said Autumn. “Our overhead is very low; we’ve always done things very frugal.”

To minimize expenses, the company decided to use the same irrigation systems as the cut flower business and rely exclusively on sunlight for their lighting. In 2018, the company decided to convert to a spray-free operation, which Autumn admitted had some challenges as the plants adjusted to the new environment. Although the transition was far from simple, ceasing the use of all pesticides has helped develop a natural ecosystem within the greenhouses, including the return of indigenous beneficial insects.

“We had all of these spotless ladybugs in our greenhouse, which as larvae look like little aliens, and a biologist from University of California-Santa Barbara reached out,” said Autumn. “She informed us that these are native ladybugs (which cannot be purchased commercially). I’m proud to say that they have continued to populate in our greenhouse because of the natural ecosystem that we developed.”

Autumn shared that Johnny Brand, head grower and chief operation officer, is invested in understanding the role of insects in their environment, both the good and bad, to continue building the natural ecosystem.

“For the beneficial insects to remain in the space, they need that constant food source, so even if you spray just one day, the insects will disappear,” said Autumn.

The company is centered on developing an operation that’s both sustainable and ecologically friendly. These initiatives include using well water, converting their biological waste into compost, choosing eco-friendly packaging and selecting strains that will naturally do well in their environment.

“Before bringing products in we do an in-depth phenohunt to ensure that the strain is not prone to powdery mildew and will thrive in a pesticide-free environment,” said Autumn.

Selecting the strains that respond well to their specific environment is just one strategy that Autumn Brands uses to ensure that the plants chosen will grow efficiently and effectively.

In areas where a financial investment is needed, like installing a blackout system, Autumn Brands is extremely frugal, opting for simpler systems first until they can fund a more substantial one on their own.

“We definitely pride ourselves with growing within our means,” said Autumn. “It’s allowed us to grow consistently, including through the recent market swings.”

The year 2020 was a monumental year for cannabis, where it experienced an extreme surge of interest. As a direct result, several new brands entered the industry, resulting in an oversaturated market, including extreme price drops and the departure of several brands and dispensaries. Legislation requirements and the associated financial constraints have also made it challenging for some companies to remain a part of the market. Over the last year, Autumn Brands has made several significant investments, including installing sprinklers and fire hydrants to meet the new licensing requirements. Saving some of the profits from 2020 has enabled them to make these changes, placing them in a good position to keep moving forward.

“If you want to be a grower, make sure you do your research and understand what is really at stake here,” said Autumn. “This includes knowing all the costs involved and trying to do it as affordably as possible. Don’t try to be a big shiny object putting all your money into infrastructure; instead, invest that time and money into good employees and taking care of the plants.” **GT**

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