

HORTICULTURAL INDUSTRIES

# Leadership Awards



# 2020

SUPPLEMENT TO THE JULY 2020 ISSUES OF:

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# CONGRATULATIONS TO THE CLASS OF 2020

As greenhouse and nursery growers, you face tough challenges every day. From management to training to scouting, you work tirelessly to maintain your operations and produce healthy plants. We are continually impressed by your commitment to maintain clean, pest-free growing environments and proud to be part of this unique industry.

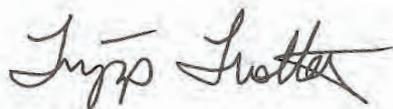
For the fourth consecutive year, we are honored to partner with *Greenhouse Management* and *Nursery Management* to recognize the extraordinary individuals who have made substantial achievements in the horticulture industry. Congratulations to the Class of 2020 Horticultural Industries Leadership Award winners: Donald Blew, Steve Castorani, Frank Collier, Lyndsi Oestmann, George and Lynda Pealer, and Bill Zalakar. These recipients have shown great loyalty to this industry and have worked hard to leave lasting, beneficial impacts.

The horticultural industry is continually evolving and, as such, Syngenta continues to work to develop solutions to the ever-changing problems you face. By continually working to expand upon our current product portfolio, offering additional agronomic programs and developing new innovations to come, we remain a committed industry partner.

As an example of our dedication to the industry, shortly after Cultivate'19 we announced the launch of Acelepryn® insecticide into the ornamental market. Powered by an innovative active ingredient, Acelepryn® is a long-lasting solution for controlling Japanese beetles, sawfly larvae and caterpillars. With the ability to apply in nurseries or greenhouses, it is a great choice for growers battling leaf-feeding insects.

We also continue to introduce new agronomic programs to help protect against the most common insects and diseases that affect crops like poinsettias, spring bedding plants, mum and impatiens. These programs are thoroughly researched and incorporate some of the most trusted products in our portfolio including Mainspring® GNL insecticide and Mural® and Segovis® fungicides. We are continuing to invest in research and development for new solutions. One of these new developments is expected to become available later this year to help you better control key ornamental diseases, including Fusarium and powdery mildew.

Again, congratulations to the recipients of the 2020 Horticultural Industries Leadership Awards! Thank you for your hard work, loyalty and persistence to grow strong, healthy and beautiful plants. 🌱



Tripp Trotter

Head of Marketing, *Turf and Ornamental*  
Syngenta

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# THE TENANTS OF SUCCESSFUL MUM **PRODUCTION**

Experts share their advice on navigating the growing cycle, common pest issues and a harmful fungus.

**M**ums are a key product for many greenhouse and nursery growers in North America. While many of the tenants of mum production are well-established, there are still a variety of issues growers must navigate.

According to Nancy Rechcigl, technical services manager for ornamentals at Syngenta, mum production largely takes place outside of a controlled environment, which means the crops are susceptible to certain pest issues.

“Since much of the garden mum production is grown primarily outside, they can be prone to invasion by several insect pests such as aphids, thrips, caterpillars and occasionally some leafminers,” Rech-

cigl says. “Two spotted spider mites can also be a problem and can build up quietly and quickly under the high temperatures of summer.”

As far as disease issues are concerned, she says root rot, caused by *Pythium* spp., and fusarium wilt, caused by *Fusarium oxysporum*, cause the most problems for garden mums.

“High temperatures and direct sun on the container can raise soil temperatures and cause stress to the root system,” Rechcigl says. “Then periodic rain events can sometimes cause the media to become over-saturated for a period of time. This drying and wetting of the media can cause injury to the roots, allowing an entryway for these pathogens. In the northern

regions, rust diseases are also of serious concern and must be prevented with a rotation of appropriate fungicides.”

There are, however, ways for growers to have successful mum crops and deal with these issues and others.

## **SOLVING PEST ISSUES WITH THE RIGHT PRODUCTS**

According to J.C. Chong, professor of entomology at Clemson University, the top pest issue for mums are aphids. Common types of aphids include melon aphids and green peach aphids. He says aphids are a problem for growers during the entire production cycle.

“When the plant is being stuck, fungus gnats become a huge problem there too,”



Mums are a valuable crop for the North American market. Learn how to work through some of the crop's most common pests and diseases.

looked at how the products were dealing with caterpillars, particularly armyworms, which are common in South Carolina.

For Mainspring GNL and Acelepryn, Chong trialed the products as a drench and a spray to see how long the products will work. They were applied once, but at different rates.

“What we do is drench the plant, put the leaves in a dish, offer them to the armyworm larvae and see how many survive,” Chong says. “What we are seeing is that the survival rate is extremely low. From zero to 14 days, we don't see any of them surviving at all. For 35 days after foliar applications, we see a little bit of reduction in their mortality rate, but the mortality rate is still at about 80-90%.”

According to Chong, both sprays and drenches of Mainspring GNL and Acelepryn work well for controlling worms across all rates.

“You can really expect one foliar application to give you 30 days of protection and one drench probably giving you 39 days of protection,” Chong says.

For growers looking to decide what product is right for them, Chong recommends matching the label for what the exact needs are. Acelepryn has a narrower pest spectrum than Mainspring GNL, but for controlling worms, the two products work similarly. If growers need protection and control against a broader spectrum of pests (aphids, thrips, leafminers, etc.), then Mainspring GNL is your tool, says Rechcigl.

For controlling worms, both products work well, Chong says.

### HOW TO DEAL WITH FUSARIUM

As noted, fusarium is a leading disease issue for mums. According to Dave Norman, an associate professor of plant pathology at the University of Florida, fusarium is a fungus common in the environment. It often gets into production during the beginning stages. During mum



Aphids (top) and fusarium (bottom) can be a problem for mums throughout the entire production cycle.

production, it can cause root damage, but is most harmful toward the crown of the plant.

“It primarily moves in a nursery via contaminated soil, by workers or by plants that have been brought in from an infected area,” Norman says. “It easily moves around a growing environment.” He adds that it can be especially harmful when plants are bigger or near the end of the growing cycle, and is more harmful when the weather is hot and/or humid.

“When you get into the southern states, it's more severe, especially in the summer months when you're getting your plants ready to sell,” Norman says.

He recommends not irrigating too late in the day to avoid the plants being wet overnight and using benches when possible to keep plants off the ground.

Chong says. “But as soon as the plant gets to a certain size and the growing media dries up a little bit, the fungus gnats more or less disappear. And then aphids really start to pick up.”

He says whiteflies and spider mites can also be a problem during the mum production cycle, especially if mums are being produced outside.

At Clemson, Chong has performed trials with two Syngenta products: Mainspring® GNL, an IRAC Group 28 insecticide used to combat thrips, whiteflies, aphids, caterpillars and other chewing pests, and Acelepryn®, an insecticide providing season-long control of grubs, as well as several species of caterpillars.

In Chong's studies, he and his team

CIRCLE INSET PHOTO COURTESY OF SYNGENTA / APHIDS ON MUMS COURTESY OF J.C. CHONG / FUSARIUM ON MUM PHOTO COURTESY OF NANCY RECHCIGL



Starting with a healthy root system is key to a successful mum crop.

## Drench protection

Amy Morris, head grower at N.G. Heimos Greenhouse, explains why she uses Mainspring GNL insecticide as a drench on several of her crops, including mums. She shares her experience at [bit.ly/MainspringDrench](https://bit.ly/MainspringDrench)



With drip irrigation of mums, monitor the wetting pattern for irrigation consistency.

Some symptoms of fusarium are a dark grey stem at the soil line in young plants, crown rot and root discoloration. Younger plants, however, sometimes don't show symptoms until they have become much larger. Combatting fusarium requires rigorous treatment with the right products, Norman says. To treat fusarium, he says it's best to use FRAC groups 3, 7 and 11. One product that combines FRAC Groups 7 + 11 is Mural® fungicide from Syngenta. Mural can be used as a drench or a spray for effective disease control.

When a grower thinks they have a fusarium outbreak, Norman says to act quickly to try and limit the spread of spores and to at least consider sending your plants to a lab to be tested.

"It's a very aggressive fungus for mums," Norman says. "Some of the most popular and unique colors you come across are very sensitive to fusarium. This has to be taken seriously."

## MORE HELPFUL TIPS

With mum production, Rechcigl says to start by thinking about rooting.

"Remember that success is all about having healthy roots," she says. "Before placing pots out in the field, make sure the field is level with good drainage and that any low areas are fixed so standing water doesn't accumulate. Keep plants evenly moist. If you are using drip tape to apply irrigation, look at the wetting pattern over time so you get proper wetting across all pots in all areas of the field."

Scouting weekly for pests is vital, as is being prepared for any problems that could pop up. "While symptoms of fusarium wilt are typically seen in August, the initial infection began several weeks earlier," says Rechcigl. "Protecting the roots in July is critical."

As a resource for growers, Syngenta built an agronomic program for mum production that offers timing and treatment recommendations for the most common insect and disease targets. It's available at [bit.ly/syngenta-mum-program](https://bit.ly/syngenta-mum-program) 🌱

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# Rooted cuttings

**ACCORDING TO** Mark A. Smith, technical service lead for Syngenta Flow-ers, one other market change is a shift toward unrooted cuttings vs. rooted cuttings. The cuttings are coming in around May/June if they are unrooted, with growers finishing the plants in the fall. Smith says the rise of larger growers having a propagation team in place at their facilities is a major reason why unrooted cuttings have grown in popularity.

"Mums are one of the easiest crops to root, so why not save on the input cost and do that work yourself?" Smith says. "It's a lower cost to start with unrooted, too." The only difference is the length of the growing cycle. Smith says if a grower wants to produce mums from unrooted cuttings vs. rooted cuttings, it's wise to start two to three weeks earlier. Otherwise, the process – and the different issues growers can face during production – is largely the same.

"One key thing to remember is that feeding and watering mums will absolutely drive growth," Smith says. "Mums are best on a constant liquid feed program. They need to be on a high volume of nitrogen, but they need to be fed on a regular basis."

ADVERTORIAL

Controlling the European pepper moth and red-headed flea beetle can be difficult, but two experts weigh in on how to scout and control these pests.

Ridding your crops of

# PESKY PESTS

Learn key methods to control the European pepper moth and the red-headed flea beetle.

**A**lthough less common than traditional ornamental insect pests like whiteflies and thrips, the European pepper moth and red-headed flea beetle are two pests continuing to gain notoriety across the country. While both pests have their signature activity, they share one thing in common: plant damage. J.C. Chong, professor of entomology at Clemson University and Nancy Rechcigl, technical services manager of ornamentals at Syngenta, share ways growers can control, combat and contain these pests.

While the European pepper moth originated in Europe, Rechcigl says their appearance in the U.S. has grown over the last five years. In 2014, the moth was a confined “quarantine pest” in a small area in Southern California, but now, she says they are being seen in states in the Northeast like New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania, along with Southeastern states including Florida and in Texas. Chong says he’s

PHOTO COURTESY OF NANCY RECHCIGL

also seen “a big jump” of moths in North and South Carolina.

Rechcigl recalls the first observance of European pepper moths in herbaceous crops, annuals, perennials and poinsettia production, but they are quickly claiming other crops. “We are starting to see activity in woody ornamentals as well,” she says.

Chong believes the moths seek herbaceous crops and woody ornamentals because it is easier for them to feed on the plant tissue.

As for the red-headed flea beetle, Rechcigl says there has also been a surge of them in outdoor ornamental production.

Like the pepper moth, they feed on herbaceous and woody ornamentals, and the injury they can cause in a short period of time can leave plants unsalable, she says.

The damage both pests can do differ from the destruction caused by whiteflies and aphids. Instead of leaf yellowing and distortion as the result of the latter sucking pests, the pepper moths and flea beetles chew.

“The European pepper moth larvae chew and bore their way into the base of the plant,” Rechcigl says. “This can cause the plant to appear wilted and can be mistaken for a root issue. Unfortunately, if too much of the lower stem is damaged, this can result in the death of the plant. Flea beetles feed on the upper layers of leaf tissue, leaving the plant with a skeletonized appearance. The more injury present can significantly reduce the value and salability of your crop. When injury levels approach 40% or higher, the plant is often unsalable.”

Like many insect pests, scouting and preventative applications are recommended. According to Rechcigl, European pepper moths lay their eggs in the upper canopy of the plant, but after hatching, the larvae drop to the soil and begin feeding on the base.

“Scouting at the base of the plant is critical for finding this pest,” she says. “They are rather small and can almost be mistaken for fungus gnat larvae because they have a dark head capsule and are just slightly bigger in size. The larvae will produce a light webbing which provides them some protection from predators. So when scouting, look for light webbing at the base of the plant at the soil line.”

Flea beetles, however, eat the upper layers of foliage and leave the lower epidermis intact, which gives a skeletonized appearance. Rechcigl says it’s harder to scout them due to their swift movement if the foliage is disturbed, and because of this, she says the feeding injury will most likely be seen before the actual pest. Chong says the multitude of these pests make them harder to control.

“These pests are quite destructive if left unchecked, so it

is important to begin control treatments as soon as indications of their presence are observed,” Rechcigl adds.

To assist growers, Syngenta offers Mainspring® GNL, Acelepryn®, Flagship® 25 WG and Scimitar® GC, insecticides that guard against many pests and provides tools for integrated pest management plans.

**“Scouting at the base of the plant is critical for finding this pest.”**

**NANCY REHCIGL,**  
technical field manager  
of Turf and Ornamentals  
at Syngenta



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

**Figure 1.** Webbing created by a European pepper moth larva on growing media surface. The webbing had captured some water droplets.

**Figure 2.** Stem hollowed by a European pepper moth larva, and subsequently impacted by rot.

**Figure 3.** Holes created by the feeding European pepper moth larvae on Heuchera ‘Paprika’. These holes often appear on the lower foliage, or those touching the potting medium.

**Figure 4.** Holes created on the foliage of Heuchera ‘Sugar Plum’.

THIS PAGE PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUANG CHONG / OPPOSITE PAGE PHOTOS COURTESY OF NANCY REHCIGL



**Above:**  
red-headed  
flea beetle  
injury on  
azalea

**Left:**  
red-headed  
flea beetle  
injury on  
mums

“For the European pepper moth, both Mainspring GNL and Acelepryn can be used to control this pest ... [they] should be applied as a heavy spray over the top of the plant so the base of the plant and stem is wet at the soil line,” Rechcigl says.

Recent trials have shown Mainspring GNL and Acelepryn are effective on the European pepper moth for seven weeks.

In Chong’s 2019 trial for European pepper moths, he observed the efficacy of Mainspring GNL and Acelepryn against the pests in the greenhouse.

“From treatment until 42 days, plants that were treated with Mainspring and Acelepryn did not see any foliar damage at all,” he says. “For water-treated plants, we saw about 33% of the plants showing damage. This tells me that Acelepryn or Mainspring can wipe out the European pepper moth caterpillars.”

For flea beetles, Rechcigl recommends Flagship 25 WG, Scimitar GC, Mainspring GNL or Acelepryn. During his flea beetle research, Chong sprayed plants with Acelepryn and Mainspring GNL three times at a 14-day interval.

“To give an example, at 42 days after the first treatment, 40.8% of the terminals of plants sprayed with only water suffered some level of damage,” he says. “But the damage was reduced to 21.7% and 25% for Mainspring GNL- and Acelepryn-treated plants. So, Mainspring GNL and Acelepryn can certainly reduce, but not completely eliminate foliage damage [because] there are just so many of the hungry beetles out there and damage can accumulate even if one beetle takes just a little bite.”

Trials on the flea beetles have shown three applications of Mainspring GNL and Acelepryn on a 14-day interval keeps the plant injury levels under 20% to 25% for a seven-week period. 🌱

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Pansy with severe two-spotted spider mite damage. This mite population was determined through lab tests to be resistant to the miticide used for control.

# IMPROVE YOUR PESTICIDE CONTROLS

with the help of IRAC/FRAC groups

Here's how you can apply the best management strategies and products to greenhouse and nursery ornamentals.

**W**ith the advent of new fungicides and pesticides available, it's important for growers to take note of the options available to them. IRAC/FRAC (Insecticide/Fungicide Resistance Action Committees) provide growers with relevant pest control information and advice. With proper product rotation and new MOAs (mode of action), growers can keep pests and diseases at bay.

## IRAC GROUPS

Daniel Gilrein, extension entomologist with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, is an expert in this field and often advises growers concerning the use of insecticides and miticides. Gilrein says the IRAC classifications are very helpful, particularly when targeting some pests and situations where there is a significant risk of resistance development, such as in greenhouse and nursery production of ornamentals.

Gilrein says there are a few things growers need to keep in mind when it comes to properly rotating insecticides. After the pest problem is identified where treatment is deemed necessary, he lists out a plan based on the following factors:

- 1) The pest's track record for development of resistance
- 2) The history of what that pest population has been exposed to (as far as known)
- 3) The size of the problem (i.e. is the pest population already high or still at an early stage of development)
- 4) The pests' stage(s) targeted (i.e. scale crawlers or mainly mites in the egg stage)
- 5) Grower preferences (compatibility with biocontrols, the need for short re-entry interval, products already at hand, etc.)
- 6) The crop to be treated and possible sensitivity (some insecticides shouldn't be used on particular plants)
- 7) Efficacy
- 8) The application equipment being used

When pests develop a resistance, managing them becomes an extremely difficult task and may lead growers to have to discard a portion, or all, of their crops. "They

must rotate chemistries and be proactive about managing resistance because some pests are notorious for developing insecticide- or miticide-resistant populations. Additionally, the population at hand may already have resistance to some materials,” Gilrein says.

“Rotating among different modes of action can reduce the risk of promoting resistance or maintaining resistance in a population that already has it. It is especially important for propagators to be aware of the issue, so resistant pests are not conveyed with plant material,” he says. “Also, we want to make sure insecticides and miticides will work when we need them, and they continue to be available and useful for a very long time; thinking of ‘natural resource’ we want to conserve.”

Enter diamide insecticides in IRAC Group 28, which differ from traditional chemistries. Nancy Rechcigl, technical services manager for ornamentals at Syngenta, shares why using diamides is a good option for growers.

“The active ingredients in this group selectively activate the ryanodine receptor in the insects’ muscles, causing the release of calcium ions,” Rechcigl says. “This results in paralysis and rapid inhibition of feeding and other key physiological functions. Insect feeding is typically stopped after initial ingestion, and insect mortality is observed within 2-7 days, depending on the pest.”

“Many insecticides in other IRAC groups affect different aspects of the pest’s nervous system, the diamides target a different site, making them a good rotational tool. This class

of chemistry has also shown to be compatible with the use of beneficial insects and mites, which makes them an ideal partner in integrated pest management programs,” she says. “When plants are treated with a diamide and challenged with insect pressure, the plants are protected and the pests are not able to establish in the crop.”

For successful integrated pest management programs, growers should focus on preventive applications rather than curative, which is especially necessary when using biological controls, according to Gilrein. Managing the problem early is key, because gaining control later may be much more difficult, due to things like high pest populations, dense plant canopies and plants arranged or spread out that makes insecticide coverage difficult — and may require more material to get rid of the insects.

Rechcigl notes diamides can be used in curative applications for pests such as worms and leafminers, but preventive applications (when the pests are first observed) are best for controlling whiteflies, thrips and mealybugs.

“In addition to use as foliar sprays, some diamide insecticides have systemic activity when applied to soil, media or bark, and relatively few other insecticides have such systemic uses,” says Gilrein.

Mainspring® GNL and Acelepryn® insecticides from Syngenta are two diamide chemistries with systemic activity that act as shields to protect plants from a wide range of insects.

“While the mode of action

of how they work is similar, the different active ingredients within the diamide class of chemistry differ somewhat in their pest spectrum and in their systemicity,” says Rechcigl. “While all diamides have translaminar activity, only cyantranilprole (Mainspring GNL) and chlorantranilprole (Acelepryn) can be applied as a foliar or bark spray or as a drench for long, systemic protection.”

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
on Insecticide/Fungicide Resistance Action Committees, including IRAC and FRAC groups, visit [www.irac-online.org/modes-of-action](http://www.irac-online.org/modes-of-action) and [www.frac.info](http://www.frac.info).

## FRAC GROUPS

Margery L. Daughtrey, senior extension associate at Long Island Horticultural Research & Extension Center at Cornell University, shares why it’s important to properly rotate fungicides. She says diseases with rapid epidemic development and prolific pathogen sporulation, such as Botrytis blight, downy mildews and powdery mildews, are the ones where it is most important to practice fungicide rotation — and is critically important

for crops being cultivated in greenhouses.

She notes key resources are the information on the product label (where the FRAC group is always given) and the FRAC website itself, which updates listings every year.

“The main danger is that you think you are rotating properly when in reality you’ve followed one fungicide application with another one from the same FRAC group

— which means they will have the same mode of action, even though the product name and the fungicide’s common name might sound quite different,” Daughtrey says.

“Strobilurin fungicides, for example, they are all in FRAC Group 11, so there is no point to treating twice with Heritage and then ‘rotating’ to treat twice with Compass. You’ll be exposing the fungus population to the same weapon by a different name, and you will be encouraging strobilurin resistance in the fungus population.”

With the help of 11+7 fungicides, like Mural® from Syngenta, growers can be sure they are using an effective management method.

The combination of two



High numbers of sweet potato whiteflies on poinsettia could be the result of poor coverage, incorrect choice of control or insecticide resistance.



In this *Fusarium* wilt trial, the mums on the left were the inoculated control group and the mums on the right were treated with a 7-ounce directed spray of Mural to the base of the plant.

**“Using contact action materials at low or no danger of resistance development during periods when the environment is not highly conducive to disease, or alternating them with 11+7 materials, is a good strategy.”**

— MARGERY L. DAUGHTREY, senior extension associate at Long Island Horticultural Research & Extension Center at Cornell University

highly effective and broad-spectrum fungicide modes of action — an SDHI (succinate-dehydrogenase inhibitor) fungicide paired with a strobilurin — will slow resistance development to a pathogen that happens to be susceptible to both, she says.

“An 11+7 material will help you to cope with leaf spots, powdery mildews, downy mildews and rusts,” she says. “And you are likely to be getting some systemic action against the pathogens.”

Daughtrey notes growers shouldn’t rotate an 11+7 or an 11+3 fungicide with an 11 fungicide. This is due in part from the perspective of the tiny fungus growers want to manage. It will see continuous 11s, and growers will thus increase the selection pressure, so the strobilurin component will become ineffective sooner, she says.

“Using contact action materials at low or no danger of resistance development during periods when the environment is not highly conducive to disease, or alternating them with 11+7 materials, is a good strategy,” she says, “Learn which fungicides work best against the problems your crops are subject to, and deploy them strategically, keeping in mind the need for thoughtful fungicide rotation.”

The key attribute that makes Mural an ideal choice for growers is due in part to its translaminar and systemic activity, but also because it is xylem mobile.

“When applied as a drench for protection against root and crown rots, Mural will move upward into the plant canopy to provide protection against certain foliar diseases, such as rusts and some powdery mildews,” says Rechcigl. “It is very useful for protecting daylilies or ornamental grass crops against rust, with one drench application providing six to eight weeks of protection.”

Mural also provides good control/suppression of *Pythium* spp. and offers plant health benefits. Increased root density has been routinely observed with drench applications using 2-3 ounces and foliar sprays applied at rates of 4-5 ounces.

### ROTATION COMBATS RESISTANCE

When it comes to proper rotation, Rechcigl says a robust resistance management program should include a rotation of products from at least three to four different classes of chemistry (three to four different IRAC and FRAC Codes) for each pest or disease target. For fungicides, growers should make one or two applications of the same product (if the label allows) before rotating to a different class of chemistry. Insecticide/miticide applications should target the life cycle of the pest.

“Being good stewards and preventing resistance from developing allows the grower to have more options and tools in their management toolbox. Research and development activities for the discovery of new active ingredients with new and different modes of action takes time, often 10 to 12 years, and requires a significant investment in time and resources,” Rechcigl says.

Syngenta has developed several agronomic programs with built-in resistance management strategies. They are available for download at [greencastonline.com/solutions](http://greencastonline.com/solutions).

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# AN EXCEPTIONAL CLASS OF LEADERS *in* HORTICULTURE

Gifted and admired industry leaders don't fear change. They take calculated risks and act with purpose after intently listening to the pros and cons. Leaders foster an environment that encourages the open exchange of ideas and innovation. They speak for the industry, striving to lift up everyone, not just those in their circle. You'll find such examples in the Horticultural Leadership Awards Class of 2020. Now in its fourth year, please join *Greenhouse Management*, *Nursery Management* and Syngenta as we congratulate six deserving honorees who continuously work toward the betterment of the green industry.



**NICK COLLINS**  
Publisher  
ncollins@gje.net



**KATE SPIRGEN**  
Greenhouse Management Editor  
kspirgen@gje.net



**KELLI RODDA**  
Nursery Management Editor  
krodda@gje.net

## CLASS OF 2020



**George and Lynda Pealer**  
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**Steve Castorani**  
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**Donald Blew**  
Centerton Nursery  
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**Lyndsi Oestmann**  
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 GEORGE AND LYNDA PEALER



George Pealer,  
Millcreek Gardens

# GROWING plants & people

At Millcreek Gardens, **George Pealer**, along with his late wife **Lynda**, spent a career growing top-quality plants and trying to empower those around them to reach their potential.

STORY BY CHRIS MANNING | PHOTOS BY WES MOSLEY

**G**rowing up with his two brothers in Mount Vernon, Ohio, near Columbus, gardening was a chance for George Pealer to spend time with his dad. “It wasn’t a huge garden, but that wasn’t the point,” George says. “He spent a few hours a week out there and he let me tag along.” When he got to high school, the Pealers moved to Bexley, Ohio — a larger Columbus suburb — where George worked at Connell’s Flowers. At the time, it was one of the largest florists in Ohio.

“It was a bit of shock, but it was probably the best thing for me, moving away from a small town,” he says. “Connell’s had a greenhouse and a plant retail business, so I was able to work in the greenhouses and help out in the flower shop and receive flower shipments. It really got me interested in growing flowers.”

After high school, George attended The Ohio State University and planned to study botany. He thought he might end up as a teacher before a class put him on the path of being a grower. Today, George runs Millcreek Gardens, an annual, perennial and herb growers in Ostrander, Ohio — within driving distance of where George grew up and attended school. George founded the business in 1978 with his late wife Lynda.

“I went to a horticulture class for freshman and that really made an impression,” he says. “That was all it took. I realized from then I wanted to be in horticulture. I didn’t know exactly what part, but I loved the flower part of it and Ohio State had wonderful floriculture faculty. It was really easy to get immersed in it.”

In his career, George has served on the board of directors of the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association and as the president of the Perennial Plant Association while Millcreek became one of the first nurseries in the Ohio Valley region to sell herbs on a wholesale basis. Today, he is still at the business every day, trying to help it grow and help every employee succeed.

“He’s at the forefront,” says Fred Higginbotham, Millcreek’s growing operations manager. “He will just come up and say, ‘Tell me where I can pitch in; tell me where I can help out.’ No job is too big or too small for George. People see that commitment he has.”

## Different kinds of education

During his time studying horticulture at Ohio State, George met three professors who had a major influence on him.

 **GEORGE AND LYNDA PEALER**



**Clockwise from top left: Lynda Pealer; George holds a portrait of him and his late wife Lynda and George in fall 1979; George next to a ginkgo tree Millcreek employees bought and planted in Lynda's honor**

“There was Dr. Fred Hartman and he was the professor of pomology — the study of fruit production,” George says. “He actually taught that Horticulture 101 class and he ended up being my advisor the whole time I was at Ohio State. Another teacher was Dr. George Staby. He taught the perennials identification class and he also taught perishables research. His class was one of the things that solidified my career choice.” Jokingly, George says he liked Staby despite him being a graduate of longtime OSU rival Michigan State.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there was well-known floriculture and greenhouse professor Dr. D.C. Kiplinger, whom everyone called Kip.

“He was also very instrumental in founding the Ohio Florists Association, which is now AmericanHort,” George says. “When I could have graduated with a degree in pomology, I decided to stay on a couple of extra quarters to take the greenhouse management class with Dr. Kiplinger, which turned out to be a life-changing thing because I knew I could be a grower and it’s where I met my wife, in one of his classes.”

Throughout his college career, George continued to work at Connell’s to pay his way through school. It is a decision he says only bolstered his education.

“I would take horticulture classes all day and then almost have a lab after-

wards,” he says, “because I was using my hands and doing the stuff I was learning about.”

At Connell’s, George started out by cutting flowers. At the time, the business would receive large shipments of roses, carnations and other flowers from growers in California and Oregon. The in-house flower designers had different ways of using each kind of flower, so they each had to be cut in a certain way before being placed in buckets and coolers. Around the holidays, George also started helping out with deliveries and packaging shipments.

“The diversity of the plants we worked with was amazing,” he says. “Being the biggest florist in Ohio, we’d get in flowers

PHOTO OF LYNDA AND GEORGE IN 1979 AND PORTRAIT OF LYNDA COURTESY OF GEORGE PEALER

that other people didn't have, and we'd get them directly from another grower. We'd get them shipped in these massive boxes and you'd never know what exactly would be in there."

**The defining relationship**

In George's last quarter at Ohio State, he met his future wife, Lynda, in a greenhouse management course taught by Kiplinger. They started dating soon after.

"She was a very strong woman," George says. "She went to Purdue University and had a degree in microbiology, and when she graduated, she worked at a medical center in Indianapolis doing cancer research. She realized after a year or two of doing that she didn't want to spend her life in a lab. She had been married, had children and got divorced." George says Lynda came to Columbus with an interest in horticulture and knew Ohio State was a good opportunity for her to begin doing the kind of work she wanted. Ultimately, she got a horticulture degree from Ohio State.

Soon after he met her, though, George moved three hours away to Salem, Ohio, to work at a friend's orchard. He had spent some college breaks working at orchards and thought that was the kind of work he wanted to spend this life doing.

"But I realized I really wanted to grow flowers and not apples and peaches," he says. "When I left college, I really first thought I'd grow fruit and own a farm market. Plus, I missed my future wife and when I moved back to Columbus, we were able to spend time together, which was a good thing."

The two married in 1977 and founded Millcreek Gardens a year later in February 1978. Before starting the business, the two traveled together, visiting operations such as White Flower Farm, a nursery in Connecticut, and Gilbertie's Organics, an herb farm in Connecticut, and thought the operations set a blueprint for them to found a business together.

At the beginning, George returned to work at Connell's for three more years as the business got going. At Millcreek, they combined two passions — George's for pe-



TOP: George has made team connectivity and safety a priority amid the COVID-19 pandemic. BOTTOM: Herbs, perennials and succulents are some of Millcreek's lush offerings.



rennials and Lynda's for herbs — into one combined vision. They settled down in Ostrander, located just outside of Columbus, and for a long time, Lynda grew the herbs day in and day out. When she took a step back from growing, she still helped behind the scenes.

"The thing that always impressed me about Lynda was that she loved herbs, and loved to cook with them, but couldn't find them anywhere," George says. "But we saw them [on our trip] and she thought it would be great to do them here. She was really a pioneer in our area for growing herbs in pots like you see now. It's such an integral part of our company now. People know us for our perennials and our herbs."

Lynda died on Christmas Eve in 2018, leaving behind George, six children and 12 grandchildren. She made an impact on everyone she met.

"She had extremely high standards," says Nathan Pealer, George and Lynda's son, who works in real estate. "She pushed

everybody to be better. And since she had such high standards, everybody tried their best around her, be it her family or someone at work. She held herself to those same high standards, too."

"She was only here for a couple of years when I started here," says Higginbotham, "but I'd never seen a man have as much love for his wife as George had for her," Higginbotham says.

**Helping others grow**

Higginbotham first visited the company in the early 2000s during an open house and says he was "blown away" by the facility even back then. After interning at Millcreek one summer and graduating from Ohio State the next spring, he joined the company "basically after graduating" in 2005. He started out as an assistant grower, became a head grower, and then was finally promoted to his current role as growing operations manager about five years ago.

## GEORGE AND LYNDA PEALER



Fred Higginbotham III, growing operations manager, left, George Pealer, owner and general manager, Doug Heindel, sales, business development, and marketing manager, and Megan Armstrong, assistant general manager and business office manager



George with his son Nathan Pealer, who works as a commercial realtor in Columbus



From the time he first visited Millcreek, Higginbotham saw that George went out of his way to help him however he could.

“Throughout the years, the thing I can stay about George is that he’s the nicest guy ever,” Higginbotham says. “He treats everybody from seasonal employees to somebody who’s been here for 25 years exactly the same, always with a smile on his face. It’s one thing that sets George apart.” Higginbotham says that it is not uncommon for George to hop in and help with shipping, putting stickers on pots or bringing out cold Gatorades for the workers in the greenhouse.

Higginbotham adds that the culture George has created is the major reason he has stayed at the business and cannot imagine himself leaving any time soon.

“It’s about the people,” he says. “We have people that have been here 20, 25-years plus. Like any good organization, the good starts at the top and works its way down. And while George is very involved, he lets a lot of us on the management team have the freedom to do what we do and do our jobs. I’ve always appreciated that there’s a lot of trust involved here.”

One other way George has empowered employees over the years is by consulting with HR firms to help develop best practices and help employees develop skills. A coach George brought in helped Higginbotham develop confidence in himself and challenged him to set goals for what he wanted to accomplish in his career. At the

time, Higginbotham says he was one of the newest employees at Millcreek and was having trouble finding his niche.

“At times, it was uncomfortable,” he says. “But it’s truly one of the best things that’s ever happened to me.”

Another employee George helped empower is Megan Armstrong, the company’s assistant general manager and business office manager. Armstrong came to Millcreek in 1998 after graduating from Ohio University with a degree in environmental and plant biology. Her father knew George from business they had done together and encouraged Megan to visit him at the university job fair. She started working at Millcreek full-time the following summer.

“I’ve been here ever since,” she says. “This is an overall great atmosphere. It came from him and Lynda.”

For the first part of her career, Armstrong was a grower working with gallon-size perennials and, in 2004, was named the Perennial Plant Association’s Young Professional of the Year. In 2012, she was promoted to assistant general manager, taking on responsibilities outside of growing like budgeting, staffing and overall company management.

According to Armstrong, it was a change she wanted, and one that George encouraged her to seek out. And like Higginbotham’s improvement, it came after an HR firm George hired helped do some necessary restructuring.

“The company was at a point where we needed to have more structure than we had, so [George] hired an HR firm to assess our company and help formalize people’s responsibilities,” she says. “Out of that, we got the growing side and the office side. I applied for that office position, as I’d already naturally been taking on a lot of office responsibilities like availability lists and customer communication and our website. I was naturally inclined to do those kinds of things and was bolstered by the plant knowledge.”

“One of the biggest things is the trust George places in people,” she continues. “He may challenge you for an idea, like developing a new product line for the slow season, but he’s not going to pigeonhole you. He wants your input, wants your ideas and is willing to go for it.” Both Armstrong and Higginbotham both say that, amid the coronavirus pandemic, George has been essential in keeping the company connected while also prioritizing employee safety while working and trying to keep business as normal as possible.

George’s knack for empowerment extends to Nathan and his other children, too.

“For my entire life, I’ve talked to him almost every day and he’s been a constant source of positivity and support and a steady force as far as someone I can always talk to,” Nathan says. “Each and every day, even now when I’m almost 40 years old, I love talking to him about anything I have going in. It could be business, home renovations, gardening or Buckeye football. He’s a big part of my life.”

For George, at the end of the day, empowering employees is part of the ethos he and Lynda set out to create when they founded Millcreek back in 1978. To him, along with quality and profitability, values like integrity, leadership and teamwork are part of Millcreek’s DNA. Ultimately, a significant part of his legacy is helping people find their passion just like his dad, his Ohio State professors and first employer did for him when he was just starting out.

“Our mission statement is ‘growing high quality plants, people and relationships,’” George says. “For us, that says it all.”

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Steve Castorani,  
North Creek Nurseries

# SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

**Steve Castorani** took a balanced path to success with North Creek Nurseries.

STORY BY MATT MCCLELLAN | PHOTOS BY MIKE OLLIVER

**E**ven when he's not at work, Steve Castorani has always gotten satisfaction from working with his hands. Growing food in his gardens, a project in his woodworking shop, renovating a 200-year-old house, tinkering around on his 1946 Chevy truck or his motorcycle — the 64-year-old president of North Creek Nurseries is a worldly, well-rounded individual. It's a trait he says has served him well and he recommends it to any young aspiring horticulturist.

"Try and learn as much as you can about as many things as you can," he says. "It's great to be a specialist, but to run a farm or nursery you need to have an understanding of many different things. Plant geek plus engineer, business specialist. Be open to new experiences."

## Growing up

Steve Castorani's parents were Italian immigrants. His mother was born in the mountains, his father nearer to the coast of the Adriatic Sea. His father, a mushroom grower, died when Steve was two years old. His mother, who ran a liquor store in Wilmington, Delaware, raised him with the help of his grandparents.

The family gardened and grew a lot of their own food. Coming from Italy and growing up during the Great Depression, they were self-reliant — a virtue that Steve learned well.

There were several older Italian men, friends of his family, who taught him the value of work and the rewards of gardening. Steve helped one of them on the

farm and learned how to grow vegetables and make wine. Another one taught him about greenhouse growing and plant care.

He learned an important lesson from those days. If you work hard you also have to play hard — it's the key to a balanced life. His family influenced him. But his education and that well-rounded nature came from Girard College.

When he was eight years old, Steve's mother enrolled him at Girard, an orphanage for fatherless boys in Philadelphia. Stephen Girard was a tremendously wealthy business titan. However, he had no heirs and used his vast fortune to set up a school that would mentor and educate fatherless boys from poor families.

"What that meant back then was to prepare us for life by training for a trade or a vocation so we would find employment for the rest of our life," Steve says. "When you graduated, you knew how things worked."

The Girard curriculum was quite different than what a young boy would learn in a typical orphanage or boarding school. Steve learned woodworking, electrical, even became a mechanical draftsman before he was 16. Although being away from family was difficult and he didn't always enjoy his time there, Steve's experience at Girard shaped him into the man he is.

"My deeds must be my life, when I am dead my actions must speak for me."

Those words were inscribed into the chapel at Girard College and Steve read them every time he walked into the building. He's always remembered that quote, and Girard's words remind him to put value on

his time and the actions taken in his own life. From having a family and raising two sons and seeing them be successful in their own lives to being an entrepreneur with the opportunity to make a difference in others' lives. He encourages others to find their passion and focus on what's important. He's proud of his accomplishments at North Creek, as well, and the difference it has made in the lives of many people.

"Whether we're providing plants, we're repairing ecosystems or we're just giving people jobs — and helping them to learn new skills, give them opportunities — even if they move on," he says. "And to be working in ways that I am able to give back, help others, plus have businesses that grow and sell plants that enhance people's lives as well as enrich nature and the environment."

### **Business beginnings**

After graduating from Girard at 16, Steve began studying at the University of Delaware. During that time, he started his first business. With his mom's help, he bought a \$500 pickup truck and a rototiller. He worked other odd jobs through college, then after graduating in 1979 with a Bachelor's in Plant Science he began a landscape design and installation business that was an outgrowth of his first venture as a student.

In 1979 Steve began Gateway Landscaping and Woodworking Inc., a landscape design-build firm located in Hockessin, Delaware. Later he founded Gateway Garden Center, a natural outgrowth of Steve's landscape business. Established in 1986, Gateway specializes in perennials, conifers, native plants, aquatic plants as well as water gardens. Today, Steve's wife Peggy manages the business.

In Gateway's early years, Steve met a few influential Philadelphia-area plantmen that guided him on his path. Dr. Richard Lighty (affectionately known as "Uncle Dick"), the founding director of the Mt. Cuba Center, was one of Steve's professors at UD. Dr. Darrel Apps ("the good doctor") was a prolific daylily breeder and former nursery owner who was leading the education program at Longwood Gardens. After attending one



From rain gardens and restoration projects to displays showing the benefits of native plants for pollinators, North Creek features plants prominently in trial gardens around the nursery.

of Dr. Lighty's lectures at the Delaware Center for Horticulture, Steve expressed interest in incorporating grasses in his landscape designs. Dick suggested he seek out Dale Hendricks from GreenLeaf Perennials (now Aris), who was growing grasses on the side.

Dale was interested in native plants and ecological landscapes and wanted to start a specialty nursery. After a few months of conversations, the two men decided to start a business together. Steve and Dale founded North Creek Nurseries in Landenberg, Pennsylvania in 1988.

During those early years Steve was busy full time with Gateway Landscaping and Garden Center. Several Gateway folks

were part time with North Creek as the two companies shared bookkeepers, office space, trucks and much more.

"What I admire about that organization is they started with hardly any money and built up what they have today, from scratch," says Dr. Apps.

The first year's crop was produced at Gateway's greenhouses during the spring and summer of 1988. Steve kept his landscape crew busy in the fall of '88 by building greenhouses in Landenberg, Pennsylvania, on the farm that would become the North Creek Nurseries you see today.

In those early days, Dale was the driving force behind North Creek's plant selection. He had many business contacts and

plant geek friends. Steve kept the business organized and handled building and equipment. He also had contacts and good relationships with accountants. Steve’s clear head and conservative approach to the business made for a strong foundation.

“He obviously took risks on the likes of me,” Dale laughs. “But of the two of us, I’m the crazy risk-taker and he was the level hand. You can see how well he’s done in the 10-11 years since I’ve been gone. That level hand is really what’s needed to run a business of that size.”

In 2008, Dale wanted to retire from the business, and Steve purchased his share of the company they built together.

“His influence is still present in the nursery and he is still a close friend — we still do some collaboration on plants,” Steve says.

Along the way, Dr. Apps convinced Steve and Dale to get involved in the International Plant Propagators’ Society. That proved to be an organization that benefited all sides. Steve developed friendships and found mentors like Dick Bir, a N.C. State University professor and extension specialist who was one of the godfathers of the modern native plant movement. And Steve was true to the IPPS ethos “To Seek and To Share,” taking leadership roles, including president, giving talks at meetings and tours to teach the younger generation, as he once was taught. He was awarded the honor of Society Fellow in 2005 and became the recipient of the society’s prestigious Award of Merit in 2012.

From its conception, North Creek Nurseries was a wholesale propagation nursery with an emphasis on Eastern U.S. native plants. However, several factors needed to converge for the business to grow into its current form. Sustainability and ecology certainly weren’t buzzwords in 1988.

“The markets had to mature to a point where it became important to more people than just us,” Steve says.

That happens through education and unfortunately, a degradation of the environment that these things became more relevant in the public’s mind.

“You have the hive collapse of the bees, you have water issues or lack of water. All those things play into what we do,” Steve says. “But until it affects somebody’s food supply or the air they breathe or the water they drink, most people don’t think of those things. Then it becomes relevant.”

There been temptation to expand the business into other realms, but North Creek has always tried to stay true to its initial mission. When Steve and Dale started the business, there wasn’t much of a native plant movement. Sustainable growing practices wasn’t a hot topic in the 1980s like it is now.

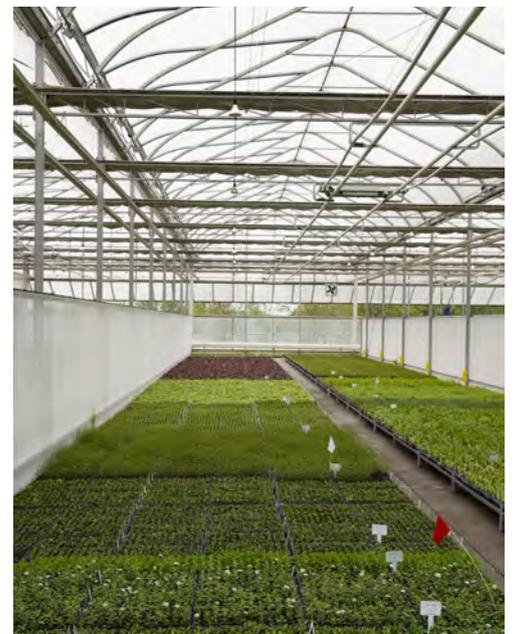
But when government or public perception starts to put demands on businesses, those businesses need to react. Steve has always tried to anticipate regulations at North Creek and Gateway.

“It’s a lot easier to be proactive and fix a problem than be reactive to something that happens,” Steve says.

### Tried and true

Steve’s experience running a landscape design and installation business gave him an advantage some pure growers lack.

“He has a great perspective having the retail store, former landscape company and working in the wholesale liner world,”



North Creek Nurseries strives to stay true to its initial mission: propagating native plants that help repair ecosystems, provide wildlife habitat and promote environmental benefits.



## North Creek Nurseries developed a mission, vision and values to help guide the business.

- **Our Mission** is to propagate and market plants that develop the relationship between people and sustainable outdoor environments.
- **Our Vision** is to be, in our customer's judgment, a leader in the development and practice of sustainable horticultural systems, producing world-class plant material.
- **Our Values** include working in and promoting sustainable environments while delighting our customers and providing opportunities for continuous learning.

As the Recession retreated and sales increased, North Creek built several new energy-efficient greenhouses, doubling production capacity, improving work flow and reducing environmental risk to plants.

says Tim McGinty, North Creek's general manager and COO. McGinty started at North Creek 17 years ago and says he and Steve balance each other out well. Steve agrees, and says Tim's experience has been instrumental in the nursery's growth.

North Creek makes a point of trialing all the plants it propagates. Dale says that Steve pushed to make sure the nursery was growing landscape-friendly plants, not just ones that would excel in "the rarified environment of the greenhouse."

"We grow plants that stand the test of time," Steve says. "And that's kind of a guiding principle."

The trial process helps eliminate the urge to grow every new perennial that

comes down the pike. The goal is to be reliable and selling customers a flash-in-the-pan plant doesn't help achieve that goal. Steve wants to avoid the treadmill of trying to figure out every year what the hot new plant will be.

"We have plants that have been in our quiver that have just been bulletproof," he says. "They last in the landscape, they're colorful, they're textural, they have all those criteria. But they actually live for the customer and they live in the environment."

North Creek maintains its landscape trial gardens on the property and invites potential customers to tours and open houses.

"Coming from a landscape back-

ground, he always wanted the place gussied up nicely with good trees, shrubs and perennials," Dale says. "The fact that people could come see the plants we were trialing really helped our reputation. These guys aren't just propagating things, they know how they grow."

From rain gardens and stormwater management and restoration projects to displays showing the benefits of native plants on the pollinator population, North Creek Nurseries' grounds have much more to show than just rows of plants.

"Steve doesn't just take a little segment of the business," Dr. Apps says. "He thinks through the whole picture of how it all fits together."

## Building a lean machine

North Creek wasn't immune to the recession. Many of its key customers struggled to stay in business, some ended up closing. In 2009 the company determined a transformation was necessary to stay profitable and maintain relevance. North Creek committed to adopting LEAN culture and began looking for efficiencies. LEAN is all about finding ways to get jobs done with the least amount of labor spent.

"That can be sort of top-down, but not with Steve," Dr. Apps says. "It's more getting everything he can from employees and how they think they can do it better. From my observations, [Steve is] one of the best people managers I've ever seen. He really is good with people. Everyone is involved in the decision making."

Steve respects his employees and the decisions they make. It's a good leadership mentality, he says, and it helped when it came time to find areas from production to shipping that could become more efficient.

"Make sure you are a good listener," he says. "It's best to gain a thorough understanding of people and processes before making judgements. Everyone has a story and you will be amazed what you can learn by asking questions."

## Sustainable solutions

At times, Steve's commitment to sustainability was tested. In North Creek's early days, the nursery grew a lot of miscanthus.

"Then our landscape architect restoration buddies started beating us up for it," Dale says. "We're making a lot of money selling these plants and now you're calling them invasive?"

Steve and Dale began researching the situation and eventually determined that the plant really was a problem. The company made the decision to stop growing it to stay on the side of conscientious plant selection and preserve their reputation as responsible stewards of the environment. It was a hard decision to turn away from that business, Steve says, but it was the right thing to do.

"We could have kept selling miscanthus and made a lot of money on it," Steve says.

"There are other nurseries that are still doing that... they're more economically-focused rather than ecologically-focused."

In 2004 Steve co-created the American Beauties Native Plants brand with Mark Sellew of Prides Corner Farms. This was a way to spread awareness of the benefits of native plants and popularize the category.

Mark Sellew had the idea for a native plants brand percolating in his head for a while before he approached North Creek Nurseries' Steve Castorani with the idea.

"Frankly, Prides Corner hadn't been doing a great job of selling native plants," Mark says. "So I wanted to start a native plants brand. I approached Steve and told him, 'You're the native plants guy and I want to start a brand. Are you in?' And Steve took the challenge, and it's been an incredible partnership and friendship."

American Beauties Native Plants are currently available at independent garden centers in Eastern, Southeastern, Midwestern and select Western States. When the brand was established, it partnered with the National Wildlife Foundation's wildlife habitat program. During the first 10 years of the program, AB donated more than \$275,000 to NWF.

In the early 2000s, Steve was working on a mission and vision statement for North Creek. He was focusing on sustainability, which was nowhere near as popular a term then as it is now. Ed Snodgrass, a good friend of Steve's and the owner of Green Roof Plants, made a point that still resonates with Steve.

"The most sustainable thing that you could do in your business is not recycling, using less water, or all the things that we think of when we think of sustainability. All that stuff's great. But his point was the most sustainable thing you can do is actually provide paychecks to these people, give them opportunities to work and to empower their lives and give them learning experiences."

## Looking ahead

Succession planning is difficult for Steve, as neither of his sons are involved in the business, but it's been on his mind since 2016, when he had a major health scare. Right before Christmas, without even knowing he was sick, he started to hemorrhage and was hospitalized with diverticulitis.

It was a major shock for someone who had always been extraordinarily healthy to have a near-death experience. It was the catalyst that got him thinking more seriously about succession planning.

"After getting knocked down in 2016, you wake up and you say, well, you're not going to live forever."

Still, he has no plans to retire soon. He would like to spend more time on his hobbies and less time managing the business. The current COVID crisis is another example of how successful nursery owners need to be able to roll with the punches.

"You have to be adaptable, have faith in the future, stay focused and work hard," Steve says. "It helps to have great people supporting you." 



In 2009, North Creek committed to adopting LEAN principles, which made the nursery more efficient.

 DONALD BLEW

Donald Blew,  
Centerton Nursery



*a love for*

**F A R M**

==== AND ====

**F A M I L Y**

**Donald Blew's** natural passion and instinctive leadership allow him to successfully continue his third-generation family legacy.

STORY BY SIERRA ALLEN | PHOTOS BY PARIKHA MEHTA

**A**s the eldest of three siblings, Donald Blew has always had an innate knack for leadership and responsibility. That hasn't changed much, given his presidential status at Centerton Nursery in Bridgeton, New Jersey. Like many operations, management has been in the family for multiple generations and in Donald's case, he leads the third.

### **Generational growth**

Nearly 50 years ago, Centerton only consisted of 9 acres of land that were purchased by Donald's grandparents, Ray and Marlene. That property was home to fewer than a dozen small greenhouses that held a few azaleas and rhododendrons, along with a 10- by 10-foot hut, otherwise known as the office. In 1977, Donald's father Denny joined the company after graduating college. Now in its fifth decade of business, the nursery is operated by Donald and his two younger siblings, Robert (Bob) and Amy.

Currently, Centerton sits on 3 million square feet under plastic and has around 190 greenhouses that

were drawn and built by Donald himself. The nursery now grows broadleaf evergreens, flowering shrubs, perennials and a full line of edibles (vegetables and herbs) — more than the few azaleas and rhododendrons it once had — and sells 10 specially crafted brands, along with many others.

The Blew brothers also co-own BlewLine Nursery, a bareroot daylily and shrub hub that was founded by their grandfather in the early 1990s to mitigate the unreliability of finding bareroot perennials. In 2006, they purchased the property with Bob serving as president and Donald as vice president and expanded the offerings to more than 100 varieties of bareroot shrubs. In 2016, they became a seller of the Star Roses & Plant brand.

### **Organically driven**

While working at two nurseries may sound like a heavy workload, it's virtually all Donald knows.

"I grew up on one end of the nursery, so I had a really big playground," Donald says. "I even keep a picture here on my desk of me at 3 years old, loading a

## DONALD BLEW

truck with my dad. That was always what I wanted to do — come back and run the nursery.”

After high school, both Bob and Amy went to college to pursue other careers. Amy majored in communications at Loyola Marymount University and Bob majored in agriculture business at Penn State University. And while Donald studied agriculture business as well, he attended Delaware Valley University with specific plans of applying his knowledge to the nursery. This wasn't by choice but was a requirement by Donald's grandfather who determined it a prerequisite to running the business. His grandfather had to practically “force him” to go, but it was Daniel Seik, an independent salesman for Centerton and decades-long friend of the Blew family, who suggested the major.

“I recommended it to him because with working alongside his grandfather and dad, he was already familiar with plant identification. He probably even knew more about the plants than his professors,” Daniel says. “But school gave him the background of business.”

Daniel says he's known Donald since he was about 12, and although his siblings grew up on the nursery as well, Donald had an intuitive attraction for the business. Some natural qualities he has, according to Daniel, are “common sense” and the ability to “solve problems and figure things out,” much like his grandfather. He also says Donald was “curious” and “always designing things.”

“Even though he doesn't have an engineering degree, he's definitely an engineer,” says Amy Ordog, who is five years younger than Donald.

When he began their Stone Cottage Farm — a line dedicated to lavender — Donald built the facility and designed rolling benches just from looking at other places. He also designed their potting machines, water boom, water tunnel, trimming machines and greenhouses, and has replicated concepts he's seen from his trips to Europe. Amy says every time they attend a trade show, they ask Donald to replicate something and he'll respond with, “Yep, I'll get it done!”



Donald Blew, the eldest of three siblings, leads the third-generation operation alongside his family.

### **From employees to family**

Amy also describes Donald as “humble” and “hands-on,” and uses his interaction with their employees as an example.

“He knows every single person who works here — all 120 of them — and that makes me proud because there are other companies who don't know who's working for them,” she says. “He knows everybody's first and last name and is the one who actually hands out checks.”

He also implemented a generous employee production bonus where employees receive a bonus for their daily accomplishments, on top of their hourly wages. But the biggest bonus he gives is in the employees evaluation three times a year.

“It's just another way to say, ‘Hey, we're all working together,’” Donald says. “It's about the company and if the company does good, we all do good.”

Centerton also has a low employee turnover rate and treats everyone like family. Not only is the nursery run by a generation of siblings, it's also operated by about 30 employees who were originally hired by Ray decades ago. Donald even said the original secretary his grandfather hired worked for 38 years before retiring just a few years ago.

### **Grandfather's genes**

Although Donald received higher education in the business, he says his father and

grandfather were “really good teachers,” being there every step of the way, while also allowing him to make lesson-learning mistakes he’d never forget.

Those teachings were also paired with trust, as they handed him the reigns to continue the family legacy. Even then, however, at 90 years old, Ray still comes in several times during the week to see how things are going. “The company is like another one of his babies,” Donald says. “So it’s been very rewarding for him to see what we’re doing.”

Jerry Schmitt began his relationship with Centerton while working as an assistant buyer for Stein’s Garden & Home when the stores worked with Donald’s dad, Denny. Now as a senior buyer of live goods, Jerry says Centerton is “one of the best third-generation organizations” he’s ever worked with. He credits that to their innovation, growing techniques, adaptability and ability to navigate through challenges whenever necessary. He also says their partnership has allowed both companies to grow.

“Whether we’re just sitting down in a room and throwing ideas at the wall, we’re always working diligently on how we can add value to the product that is being put on the bench for the consumer,” Jerry says.

While he’s never traveled with Donald, Jerry has attended garden centers and trade shows throughout the country and overseas with other family members. And since Jerry is not a grower himself, he and the Blew family brainstorm ways to move forward with the ideas they’ve conjured on both spectrums. While Jerry says Donald is “a big part of that,” he credits Bob and Amy too. Their roles — Bob as vice president and head of marketing and product development and Amy as vice president of sales — cohesively work together.

But even though Jerry attributes the success of Centerton to all three siblings, he says a lot of the innovation and operational techniques “stem from Donald” which were “handed down from his grandfather.”

“My grandfather was my mentor and he had a real knack for building equip-

ment and working with his hands,” Donald says. “I inherited a lot of those genes. For our industry, a lot of things are specialized. There’s not a ton of things out there that will do what you want them to do. My grandfather started building some equipment and greenhouses, and when we came back from college, we took everything I learned from him — his inventions and fabrications — put a spin on it and began building more updated and modern buildings and machines, anything to become more efficient and easier on our help.”

### The Blew brotherhood

Bob, who is two years younger than Donald, says he was always very protective, which Amy agrees with too. But as the older brother to a younger brother, Donald was the trickster.

“He was always the prankster older brother,” Bob says. “And he got his driver’s license before me, so we got to ride to school together. I was like the cool kid because I had an older brother that had a pickup truck.”

While they both started working on the nursery at a very young age, Bob says looking back, he realized their grandfather gave them “busy work” and “odd jobs,” most likely as a combination to grant them exposure to the land and keep them busy. This resulted in the brothers becoming “fairly well-attached,” with a lot of shared memories.

One of the first memories Bob has is from the summer of 1988, when he was

The Blew siblings: Bob, left, Amy and Donald



Donald, Bob and Amy in 1986

about 7 and Donald was about 9. Since there is a local mollusk industry near the farm, Centerton uses the surplus of clamshells to fill potholes around the property. That summer, the boys filled each pothole by combining an old 1960’s Cub Cadet lawnmower that was missing the actual lawnmower attachment, and a 12 cubic-foot dump wagon. For weeks, Donald chauffeured Bob around as they filled each pothole and earned a dollar per load.

Another memory Bob has is from about 17 or 18 years ago. Since Centerton



The Blew family: Bob, left, Rod Miller (their uncle who handles irrigation), Jill Blew (their aunt who handles shipping), Ray Blew (founder), Amy and Donald in front of the house Donald built for a customer appreciation day to promote their groundcover line: BlewBlanket Groundcovers.



An inside look at the products grown at Centerton Nursery

wasn't as big then, oddball jobs like running irrigation for frost protection, were completed by the brothers. One morning — around 3:30 a.m. — the brothers turned the sprinklers on and noticed they had an hour to kill. Donald suggested they'd get breakfast, which they did, but not without a cost.

"We eventually lost track of time and when we got back to the nursery, all the irrigation that was running got ice everywhere, but we laughed so hard because we were so exhausted from being up all night," he says. "It's just a great memory to share with my brother because it's so purely innocent, and shows that when working as hard as you can and being absolutely exhausted, you can't help but to laugh at some things."

Bob says their grandfather and father gave them room to choose the family business, but also made sure they took it seriously, and they did, which is why Bob joined the team after graduating college.

"Working here was never a forced thing," he says. "We weren't told to work here. But we were told if we wanted it, we could have it, but we had to work for it, which we did and still do."

### From farm to family

The constant words that Donald's family and friends use to describe him are "problem solver," "builder," "innovative," "proactive," "no-nonsense," "accomplishing" and "hard-working." In fact, Daniel describes Donald as one of the first ones to arrive at work in the morning and one of the last to leave.

But although Donald is hardworking, his family says he is still very much a family man and never neglects his wife of 12 years, Karol, 11-year-old daughter, Audrey and 5-year-old son, Donald Jr., especially during the weekends when he's partaking in his favorite pastime — boating.

### A future of promise

Both Bob and Amy say they are proud to be Donald's siblings and work alongside him while continuing the legacy their grandfather began. Daniel says Donald is the "ideal" person to lead the family operation, and work in the horticulture business.

"I think he's the kind of people we need in the industry," Daniel says. "He's the kind of person who will try stuff and share his knowledge with others. He actually encourages people to share their knowledge for the greater good of the industry. He's honest, hardworking, has a good heart, is a very good teacher and I think with the combination of everything, he'll be a very good leader in the industry for a number of years."

As for Donald and his plans for the future, he wants the nursery to continue evolving as it has every year.

"I think we're set up right. Each year we say, 'This is our best year ever,' until we do better the next year. We're on the younger side; we're hungry. We're ready to make moves and put the time in," Donald says. "We've got a really good team of people here on board with us and they look forward to our next chapter too, and that's really what it's about for us." 



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# A *winning* PLAYBOOK

**Lyndsi Oestmann** delivers devoted and sincere leadership in her business and personal relationships.

STORY BY KELLI RODDA | PHOTOS BY STEVE PUPPEE

**W**hether it's on a dusty softball field, in a corporate boardroom or on a gravel-lined nursery plot, Lyndsi Oestmann remains consistently devoted to the task at hand. Her purposeful and sincere work ethic was forged when she was a child, watching her dad play professional baseball. It was reinforced as she played competitive softball, persisted into her college studies and eventually became etched in her career. Lyndsi owns and operates Loma Vista Nursery in Ottawa, Kansas, a business that was founded by her father, Mark Clear in 1991.

Lyndsi spent nearly the first decade of her life traveling to ballparks to watch her father play. From some of her first memories, he instilled in her not just the importance of hard work, but the necessity of it in every aspect of life.

"Dad always taught me that if I wanted something, I had to work hard for it," says Lyndsi. "It's something he's always done, too."

When Lyndsi started playing softball at age 12, Mark told her a lesson he learned from a former coach, "You can expect to play like you practice." It's a lesson she's never forgotten and a standard that continues to drive her.

"We're a very competitive family, and when dad was my coach, we always practiced like it was the ninth inning of

the World Series," she says. "It's the same in business. You need to always do your best, not just when we're pulling orders for the customer that will scrutinize the plants the most. We want to do that every time, every day."

Sports has certainly influenced Lyndsi's outlook and how she manages employees and the business. When she started softball, she was playing 150 games a year. Mark noticed her natural leadership qualities with the team.

"I was her coach and probably harder on her than most of the other kids," he says. "Instead of moping or pouting about it, she looked on the positive side and worked until she got to be one of the better players in the area. She always dug in, no matter what it was, and she was always the team leader. It's no different now as she's running the nursery."

## **Blazing a trail**

Mark and the family moved from California to Olathe, Kansas, and started the nursery when Lyndsi was 10.

Lyndsi and her brother performed several duties at the nursery and even planted the first crop of trees. As she grew up in the family business, Mark had dreams of Lyndsi and her brother attending Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, getting a horticulture degree, and coming back to work in the family business.



Lyndsi Oestmann of  
Loma Vista Nursery



Lyndsi enjoyed working at the nursery, but she had different career aspirations. She attended Kansas State and received a marketing and international business degree with a minor in Spanish and planned to travel the world. After graduation, she landed a job at PepsiCo Inc. and got a taste of corporate America. She dove in, learning all she could about managing people and process improvement. While at PepsiCo, she learned about accountability and had the good fortune of being cross-trained within several departments.

She wasn't traveling the world as originally planned, but unbeknownst to her, Lyndsi was soaking up valuable lessons that she'd eventually take back to the family business.

Mark bought property in Ottawa to expand Loma Vista and he needed someone to run the Olathe operation, which had been converted into a landscape distribution center. He asked Lyndsi to return home and manage the distribution division.

"I really liked being part of corporate America, but when dad offered me this opportunity, I thought, 'I can do this because I've had this great training and I've been managing people at Pepsi and learning how to manage processes,'" she says.

Taking a job away from the family business also taught her how to work for a boss who's not part of the family — some-

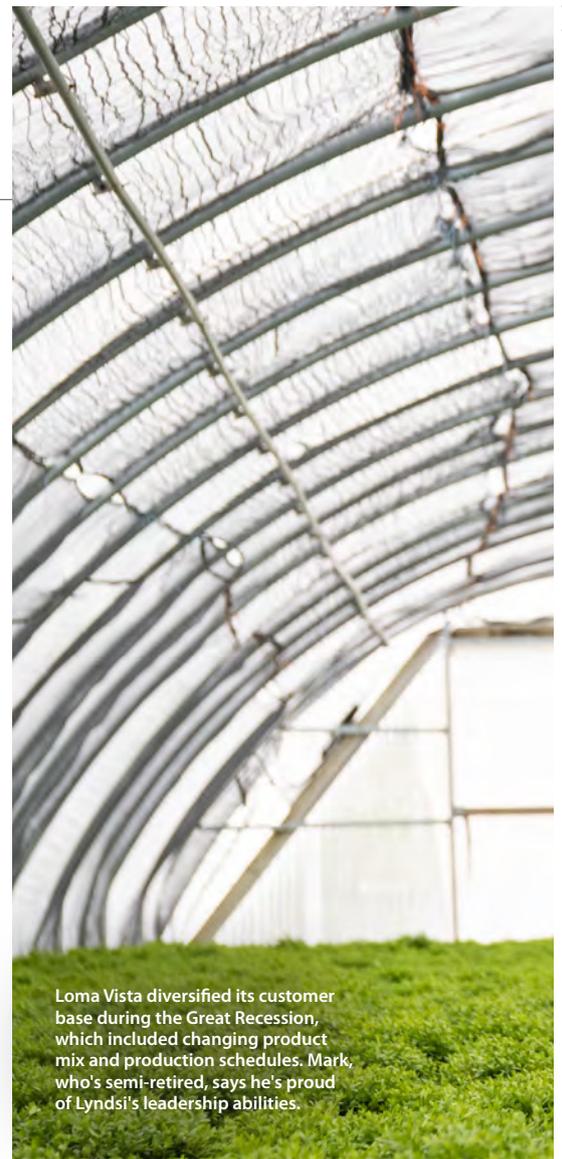
thing she recommends for anyone working for relatives.

"That was a really important lesson. It's a skill you need to have to be able to separate the business relationship and the personal relationship," she says. "On Saturday afternoon we may be celebrating a birthday and he's my dad, but on Monday morning, he's my boss. That really helped me be a better employee and manager."

Lyndsi brought a fresh perspective when she returned to the nursery.

"Dad and I make an awesome team because his passion for the business has always been on the production side, and I came in and immediately focused on sales, customer service and marketing," she says.

Since returning to Loma Vista, she hasn't had a single regret — even through the Great Recession and the current COVID-19 situation.



Loma Vista diversified its customer base during the Great Recession, which included changing product mix and production schedules. Mark, who's semi-retired, says he's proud of Lyndsi's leadership abilities.

"Coming back to the family business was the best decision I've made in my life," she says.

### Executing a game plan

As she gained a foothold in the distribution operation at age 23, she looked to some of her landscape contractor customers as mentors.

"I tried to learn some of their best practices and see how we could apply those to our own operation. I looked at companies with really strong cultures and ones that had good employee retention," she says.

She asked her customers what they needed from the Loma Vista team, had face-to-face meetings with customers, conducted focus groups and sent out surveys.

"She's a hands-on visual learner," Mark says. "I was always more into the growing side of the business and she was managing



our two distribution sites. She came in and found areas that needed improvement and executed those changes. She did it by building a good team. She's got the team concept down pat."

Four years ago, Loma Vista sold the distribution division to SiteOne, one of the largest landscape distribution companies in the nation. The deal essentially reduced the size of the company by half, which gave Lyndsi the opportunity to work on the production side of the business.

"It was a great move for our company," she says.

Now the company was solely focused on growing and there were some staff changes, which presented another chance for Lyndsi to learn new skills.

Her first lesson was in approaching change. The company's controller was leaving, and Lyndsi took over the finance and accounting duties of that position.

"I was ready to change everything. We were doing a good job, but I felt like we could be so much more efficient," she says. "As I started talking to one of our key team members about all of these changes, they had one of those deer-in-the-headlights looks.

"I tended to approach change like just grab the bull by the horns and just do it. But I've learned that I need to slow down a bit and respect how others react to change. It's important to have lots of communication during changes, really overcommunication in this case, to have complete transparency and buy-in. Because nothing works without buy-in."

### **Providing for people**

Mark taught Lyndsi a lesson that she never forgot and one that resonates with every decision she makes about the company.

"Dad has always said that people are

the most important asset of a company," she says.

Investing in the Loma Vista employees has been her top priority. Applying some of her experiences from PepsiCo, nursery team members are cross trained to understand how each department affects the others. There's accountability throughout the system.

"It used to be that one person knew how to do everything, and if that person wasn't at work, there'd be a lot of people standing around not knowing what to do. So, we developed a playbook for our company with strong documentation of our processes and a formalized planning system," she says.

Another vital part of training at Loma Vista is taking part in nursery conferences and visiting other nurseries.

"I want everyone on our production team to have lots of contacts in the indus-

## LYNDSI OESTMANN

try,” she says. “If they’re facing a challenge, they can pick up the phone and call on a fellow grower. Or they can go on a nursery tour and bring back an idea for us to execute. A good example is our propagator, who’s been here for five years. She went to Bluebird Nursery to look at their perennial production. Making those contacts and going to those events has totally changed the dynamic of our team.”

The nursery’s interns also get the same opportunities to learn from industry events.

“We take our interns to Cultivate each year and they’re tasked with finding one thing or one idea that can be used or implemented at Loma Vista. It’s great having a different set of eyes there. They have an interesting perspective,” she says.

Lyndsi brings in three or four interns each year from all over the country. They spend time with the management team and one-on-one with Lyndsi. They go through every department and see how the operation works. They attend planning and management meetings.

“I take them out into our local Kansas City metro market to visit related businesses and set up tours with our customers, other nurseries and independent garden centers because it’s important for them to see other parts of the industry,” Lyndsi says. “I encourage them to actively seek out mentors, to be curious, ask questions and to share their ideas. No matter your experience level, once you understand the ‘why’ behind things, you can be the person who effects change.”

Once the interns have completed that process, they’re able to choose one area of the nursery to concentrate on for the remainder of their internship.

“I’m inspired by her support of students and emerging leaders,” says Sarah Woody Bibens, executive director of the Western Nursery and Landscape Association (WNLA). Lyndsi serves on the WNLA Board of Directors.

Loma Vista provides a sponsorship that brings students to The Western [trade show] each year. And she takes that extra step to ensure interns and their families are comfortable before making the trip to Loma Vista.

“She genuinely cares for these students. Part of her process involves asking students who the support people are in their life. Lyndsi called one intern’s mom to reassure her about the responsibility they take with the students,” Sarah says.

Lyndsi values every person that’s related to the nursery, from each employee and their families to the customers and the community.

“My mission in business is to help the company become the best it can be,” she says. “The company is a lot bigger than just a nursery and its employees. The health of a lot of families relies on Loma Vista, and I take that really seriously.”

That blends impeccably with her mission in life.



“I want to always strive to be the best version of myself, to act with purpose and outwardly express people’s value to everyone I encounter,” she says.

Caitlin Hupp, a territory sales manager at Loma Vista, says she admires Lyndsi’s ability to see the potential in people and help guide them to their best role.

“There’s so much about Lyndsi that makes her a great leader. She’s very conscious of everyone having a work/life balance and she gets to know the families of everyone here,” Caitlin says. “I admire that she’s worked in every role in the company, so she can speak from experience no matter the job. She doesn’t hire square pegs for square peg roles. She sees the potential in people, lets them experience the company culture and helps find a good fit for them.”

Cheryl Boyer, the nursery extension specialist at Kansas State, has been colleagues with Lyndsi for about 12 years.

“I have thoroughly enjoyed watching her career grow. It’s wonderful to have a progressive nursery leader in Kansas,” Cheryl says. “Her perspective — coming from Pepsi and then landscape distribution — is one of the key reasons Loma Vista is successful. That combined with the culture she’s built. The fact that the nursery even talks about culture is amazing. She puts a lot of time and effort into training and mentoring new leaders.”

Mark also marvels at her ability to build a team.

“When she’s looking for a new team member, she’s looking for someone who’s better than she is at certain tasks,” he says. “The team that’s in place is the best it’s ever been. It’s one of the best things she’s done for our company.”

### Reacting with purpose

As the nursery was navigating the Great Recession, Lyndsi made a profound observation during a budget meeting with her dad, an operations manager and the accounting manager.

“I said, ‘Hey, we’re four people and we’re trying to move the direction of 150 people. We need everyone in the company to hear these numbers. We need everyone to understand what’s going on so the four of us aren’t spinning our wheels.’”

The company became totally transparent and began sharing all financial information in company meetings, including how the nursery is performing compared to budget and how it’s doing compared to industry benchmarks.

“It has made a huge difference. Having buy-in from everyone – not just your top managers, but your middle managers, supervisors and down to the individual level — it’s difficult to get 100% buy-in, but we’re working on it,” she says. “One person, or in our case four people, can’t make the company successful. It is the effort of every single person here because every person is here for a reason.”

The employees appreciate the transparency.

“When Lyndsi implemented the open-book mentality with our budget and finances, that let us know she believed in our capabilities and our ability to problem solve,” Caitlin says. “She gives us the power to get involved and make decisions about the business and the direction we’re going, and to provide solutions to obstacles.”

During the last recession, Lyndsi also realized the nursery’s customer base needed more diversity.

“We were deeply tied to the commercial construction market, so we took a hit during that time,” she says. “We knew right away that we had to put some measures in

place, which took a lot of time and planning, to diversify our customer base. We put a lot of work into our product mix, our production timing, how we tag products, how we deliver products and how our sales team operates. I feel a lot more comfortable having a diverse customer base as we face another recession.”

With the recent COVID-19 concerns, Lyndsi realized the importance of being nimble, which also means having a well-developed plan in place.

“We work off of really solid plans — plan A, B, C, all the way to Z if needed. You have to be able to make changes in a timely matter and plan for the things that you can control,” she says. “In the past I have spend a lot of sleepless nights worrying about things that are out of my control. That’s futile. Now we plan for possible scenarios and execute the plan based on variables we can control.”

Loma Vista’s customers appreciate the team’s focused planning and the calculated reactions.

“My company started in 1991, the same year as Loma Vista, and we were their first credit customer,” says Marty Seiler, principal of Epic Landscape Productions in Olathe, Kansas. “Lyndsi has worked hard to lead Loma Vista and take it a step forward. Sometimes in family businesses, the second generation rides the coattails of the first generation. That is not the case with Loma Vista. She’s very professional, well studied and very knowledgeable of the industry. There’s a high level of confidence from father to daughter.

“She demonstrates a passion and love for the industry. She’s personable and easy to talk to. As we’ve gone through the recent COVID-19 issues, we’ve been able to work through some of those issues together.”

### Leaning on family

Lyndsi says motherhood has changed her the most, bringing her more empathy and patience.

“I feel so fortunate as a mom working in a family business. And now I try to extend grace to the moms working in our nursery,” she says. “When I had my youngest, we were right in the process of buying a second distribution center loca-

tion and we opened it about a month after she was born. I just strapped her into the baby carrier and took her to work. We did that for six months. It was nice to get to go to work and spend time with her.”

Her girls are ages 8 and 6, and Lyndsi says they love to go to work with her. “They like to prune and check on the crops. My 8-year-old has even answered the phones,” she says.

Lyndsi and her husband recently bought an old farmhouse and they enjoy remodeling projects with a special emphasis on the landscape, of course.

“He’s in the construction management business and is a really smart businessperson, and I’m able to talk to him about the nursery business — but not every night,” she says with a chuckle. “He’s patient and he’s a good problem-solver. In his business, safety standards are so rigorous, so he’s helped me strengthen our safety program. That was a focus for us this year.”

Lyndsi can always count on her brother for advice. He’s in the produce business in Southern California.

“When I need an outside opinion, he’s one of my go-tos,” she says.

He’s the one in the family who lived out Mark’s dream and received a horticulture degree from Cal Poly. He also received a master’s in ag business from Purdue.

“I tried to hire him back into the nursery last year, but he decided not to move back to Kansas. I guess we can’t compete with Southern California and life on the beach,” she says.

Lyndsi also leans on a tight-knit group of female friends who are also businesswomen.

“I lean on them personally and professionally,” she says. “It’s critical to make connections outside the industry and see how others handle challenges.”

Whether it’s examples from her dad and industry mentors, or advice from her circle of friends or her husband, Lyndsi has learned that effective leadership characteristics involve being a good listener, listening to understand, being open minded, admitting when you’re wrong and being OK with it, as well as willing to make mistakes but learn from them. 

# AN educator & advocator

By leading with facts, patience and a thorough understanding of the industry, **Bill Zalakar** is advocating for floriculture while training the next generation of growers on Long Island.

STORY BY KATE SPIRGEN | PHOTOS BY KEITH BARRACLOUGH

**B**ill Zalakar has always been a self-starter. At the age of 10, he was ordering seeds and planting vegetables and by the time he was 14, he was hauling hundreds of pounds of tomatoes to the local grocery stores to make a little bit of money. He ended up being so successful that he paid most of his way through college.

He learned early on that for some things, you have to rely on Mother Nature, but his long-term goal was to find something he could have a little more control over.

Bill was lucky enough to live right beside a large greenhouse company called Johnson Florists in Pittsburgh. So, at 16, he applied for a job and applied again, and again, and again. Finally, the company told him that if he would work the night shift helping with the boilers, they would let him do a little greenhouse work.

He jumped at the chance and landed his first job at a greenhouse. "I always knew that's what I wanted," Bill says.

From there, he went on to study horticultural business at Penn State, where he was active in campus life, including serving as president of the Horticulture Club.

"When I was at Penn State, my grades were not always that great. I'll be the first to admit it," he says. "I use it as a scenario to explain to people that everything is not always about grades."

By the time his senior year came around, Bill didn't even need to apply for a job. Flower Time, a bigtime Long Island grower-retailer had come knocking. While the company was looking for someone to work at one of their retail stores, Bill had his eyes on a job in the greenhouse.

"They never hired anybody for the growing facility. They were always hiring for retail stores, but I was insistent that my forte was really more greenhouse," Bill says.

Flower Time agreed to hire him for a greenhouse position, and two days after graduating from Penn State, Bill was working in the facility on Long Island. Two and a half

BILL ZALAKAR 

Bill Zalakar,  
Kurt Weiss  
Greenhouses

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Kirk Weiss, left, and his brother Wayne Weiss, are the second generation leading Kirk Weiss Greenhouses. Kirk and Bill have known each other for 20 years, and the two are just like family.

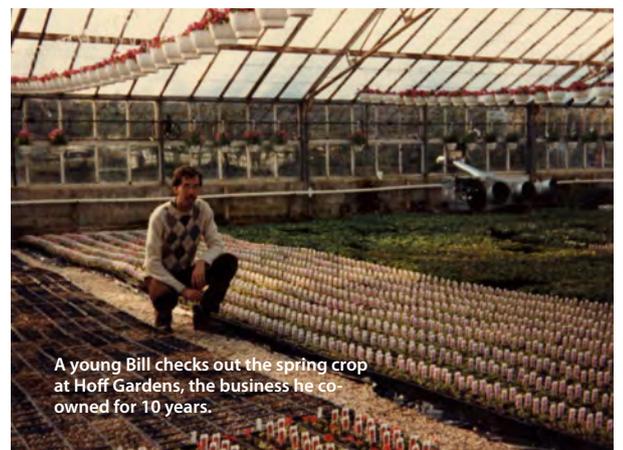
years later, Flower Time sold to the company that owned the popular Midwest chain Frank's Nursery & Crafts.

At that point, Bill had gone into business with a partner to start a wholesale perennial operation and left Frank's. "The family scenario really kind of dropped out of [Frank's] and that's when perennials were just coming out back in the 80's," he says.

He and his partner (his now ex-wife) weighed their options and chose to go into the niche market of selling 1-quart perennials, founding Hoff Gardens. "We were a company with zero money, zero resources; we were way under-capitalized, but we made it," he says.

About 10 years later, all of the bills were paid, but Bill and his partner were going through a divorce. Being good friends with the Weiss family, he got some good advice from Russell Weiss. "Russell said, 'Listen, the more you argue, the worse things are going to get,'" Bill says. "Try to work things out."

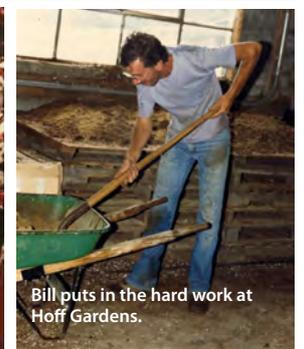
Russell helped the two mediate and Bill got started down a new path at Kurt Weiss Greenhouses in Center Moriches, New York, where he now leads the team as general manager at the main location.



A young Bill checks out the spring crop at Hoff Gardens, the business he co-owned for 10 years.



Bill with his first crop of hanging baskets at Flower Time



Bill puts in the hard work at Hoff Gardens.



Bill Zalakar is a horticulturist at heart who has been growing since he was just 10 years old. His hobby grew into a business that put him through school and eventually turned into a lifelong passion.

### Growing the team at Kurt Weiss

Century-old Kurt Weiss Greenhouses is very much a family business, and that includes Bill. Even though he doesn't share the Weiss name, he's a family member nonetheless, says Kirk Weiss. Kirk, who runs the operation with his semi-retired father, Russell, his brother and his two sons, has known Bill for more than 20 years.

"We're basically the same age and it's almost like we've grown up in the business together," Kirk says. "He's always willing to lend a helping hand no matter what."

And Bill treats his employees like family as well. He and his wife regularly invite crew leaders to their house for dinner parties and find different ways to keep up the company morale. "That's what I think I learned most from Russell Weiss, is mak-

ing it feel like you're a part of the family," Bill says. "Some companies, they just lose that touch and the people don't feel like giving that extra effort."

Bill's friendly nature and calm demeanor have helped him enact real change for both Kurt Weiss Greenhouses and the industry. Whether serving on the advisory board for Cornell University or the Long Island Farm Bureau where he's acting president, Bill finds a way to lead people to make the right decision, says Mark Bridgen, Cornell professor and director of the Long Island Horticultural Research and Extension Center. Mark describes Bill as the "Dr. Fauci of horticulture" because he always provides accurate information and hopes that people follow.

"Whenever he's trying to convince a person or a group of people to see things his way, he presented the facts and the

issues and hoped that the information that he gives is going to be enough to convince them to change their minds or to follow his lead," he says. "He's always impressive that way."

### Building from the ground up

As general manager at Kurt Weiss' main location, Bill has had a hand in almost every aspect of the business. Any initiatives the company starts, Bill is there from the very beginning through to the day-to-day execution.

That's understandable for a man who has done "basically every job" in the greenhouse, according to Kirk. "Our philosophy, as well as Bill's, is that we work together. So, we wouldn't ask somebody to do something we haven't done ourselves, and we've done every one of these jobs," he says. "If you've already done it, you understand the job."

Kirk says two of Bill's great strengths as a leader in the greenhouse are that depth of industry knowledge and his communication skills. That combination makes him a natural leader.

"It's very easy to get people to follow him versus if you brought somebody in that knew nothing about the industry and didn't know what it takes," Kirk says. "That means a lot."

And in his time at Kurt Weiss, Bill has been able to build a management team he trusts, including managers for maintenance, inventory, production, sales and growing. The team meets each week to discuss plans for production, shipping and everything in between.

But Bill doesn't just keep up with the upper management team. He makes sure to do his rounds in the greenhouse. "I do have a lot of involvement with the employees," he says. "I'm constantly walking around the greenhouse or in the field talking to everybody."

### Diversifying the labor pool

Kirk says Bill has really helped Kurt Weiss Greenhouses navigate the changing landscape of hiring from simple word-of-



## INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE

Bill has always been interested in both teaching and giving back. For about a decade when he was running Hoff Gardens, he bred and raised llamas, and used the farm to educate schoolchildren, and work with autistic people, nursing homes and more. “That was kind of my stress relief that I was able to give back to people and educate people, especially kids. They’re all the future of any industry, really,” he says.

He shut down the llama farm when he started at Kurt Weiss, but still found an outlet to teach by expanding the company’s relationship with foreign exchange students. At any given time, he works with 30 to 40 international students at Kurt Weiss from various organizations like Worldwide Farmers Exchange and the Worldwide International Student Exchange.

Mark says Bill sees international students as an asset, not only as an alternative labor source, but because he genuinely enjoys working with new people and training them. Going above and beyond, Bill will bring students to Cornell University open houses and meetings, and to Long Island Flower Growers Association meetings, even going as far as to pay their way.

“I really make a special effort because those people come from all over the world and they want to experience the American dream,” Bill says. “They see that it’s not always fun and games; it’s hard work also. But there are a lot of opportunities to advance, whereas in a lot of other countries, that’s not going to realistically happen for them.”

Always an educator, Bill spent nearly a decade breeding and raising llamas for outreach work. Here, he poses with one of his llamas at a show in Virginia.

mouth to delving into the different ways to diversify the labor pool.

In past years, to combat the ever-present issue of finding labor, Bill initiated several student programs, working with student organizations at The Ohio State University and with agriculture students from different countries around the world. “It has just helped a lot on the labor side of our business and scheduling,” Kirk says.

The company has gone from one full crew that worked whatever hours it took to get the job done to splitting the work up into shifts. Now the greenhouse has a night shift and a loading crew, with enough laborers to staff each.

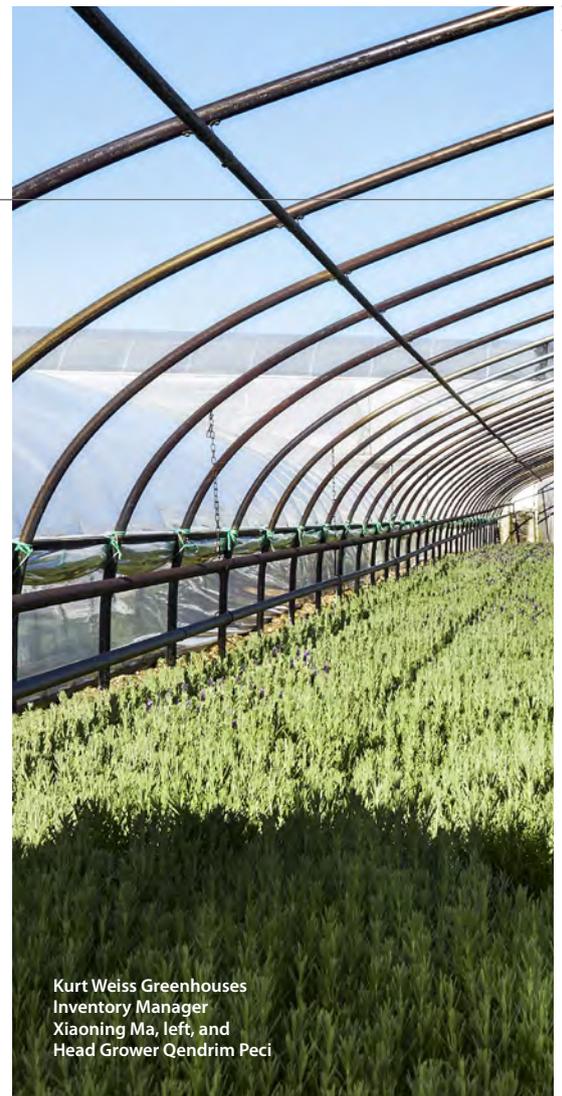
“It’s been challenging the last few years — very challenging — to find labor. Every industry is facing that,” Kirk says. “We had to get really creative in how we attract labor — finding what time of day people had availability and working on setting up different shifts. It sounds easier than it is, but he’s working on a lot of that.”

### Leading from the front

When COVID-19 hit, Kurt Weiss Greenhouses began throwing out Easter crops (Bill estimates the company destroyed about 70%). And while the company was missing out on early spring revenue, they were also trying to navigate social distancing and new sanitation procedures, Bill was leading the charge.

The greenhouse, like many others in the industry, wasn’t sure if they could remain open, Kirk says. But by working alongside his colleagues at the Long Island Farm Bureau, Bill was able to make the case for greenhouses to be deemed ‘essential.’

“Through his connection and the Farm Bureau, he was able to help a lot of companies out there and push forward,” Kirk says.

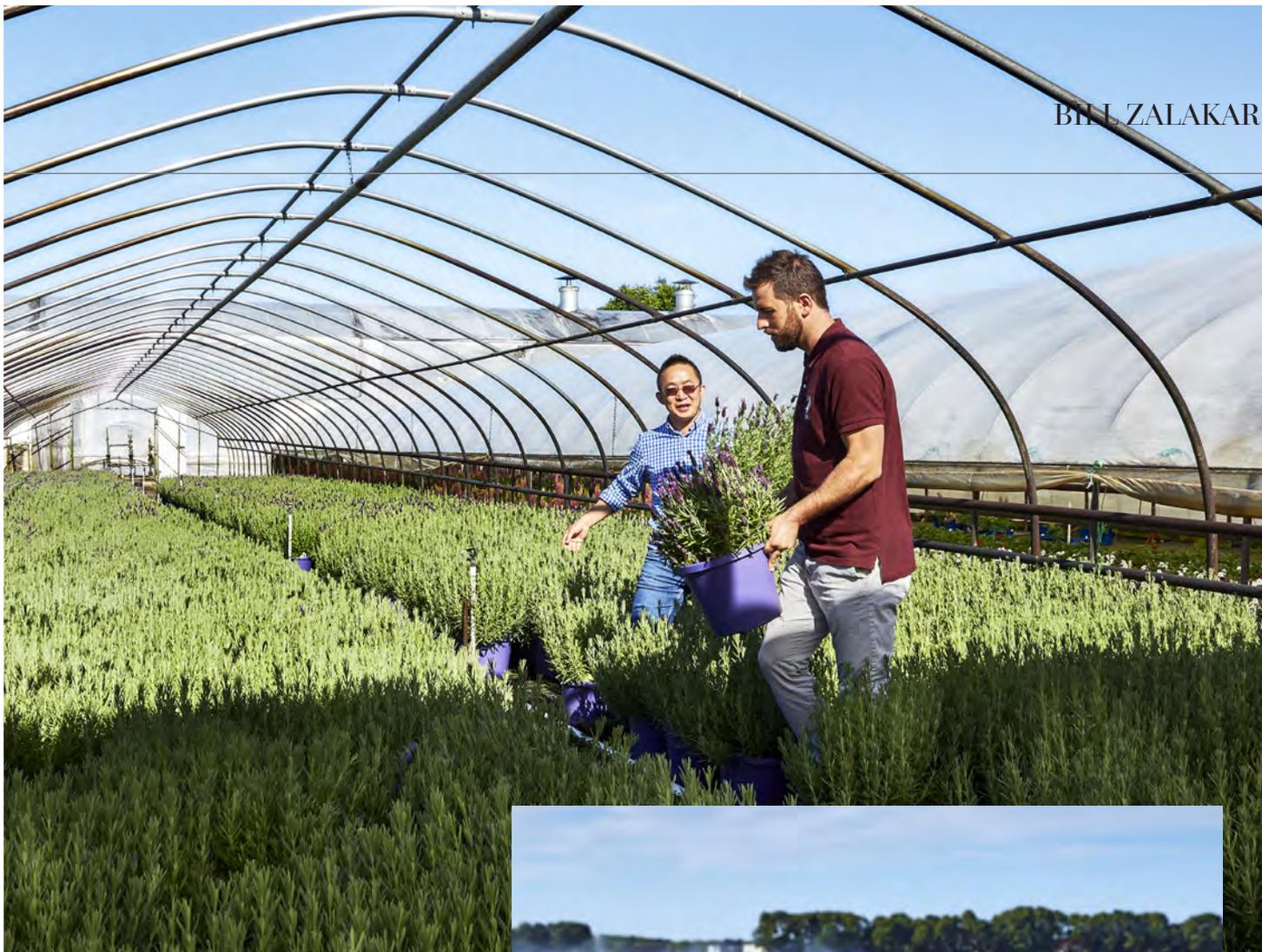


Kurt Weiss Greenhouses  
Inventory Manager  
Xiaoning Ma, left, and  
Head Grower Qendrim Peci

Bill made several trips to Albany to explain the situation to New York Agriculture Commissioner Richard Ball, explaining that “plants are like animals,” Mark says. “They were given exceptions to animal facilities with cows and horses because somebody had to feed the cows and so on. And Bill convinced the commissioner that plants are the same way. If they don’t get watered; if they don’t get cared for, they can’t survive and the industry is going to suffer tremendously. He’s been one of the behind-the-scenes people that actually have been able to get things open for us.”

But that’s not the first time Bill has gone to bat for the industry. He and Mark met when Bill served on the advisory board at Cornell University. There, Mark noted that Bill was never afraid to be a voice for the industry whenever conflicts might arise at the university.

Mark describes Bill as “very outgoing, very friendly and very unassuming,” which have helped him become not only a voice for the industry, but a consensus-builder.



“He’s not arrogant; he’s not forceful. He’s just a pleasant man who knows what he’s talking about and can convince people without being obnoxious. He can just convince people of the right thing to do.”

Kirk describes Bill as a team player who knows how to get people to work together. That comes in handy in his work leading teams at Kurt Weiss and as president of the Long Island Farm Bureau, as well.

“He’s very dedicated and he really represents a lot of different factors of agriculture by being from the floriculture side,” Kirk says. “Floriculture is a big part of agriculture on Long Island and so it’s definitely helped our growers and he’s really shining in this role.”

Not surprisingly, Bill’s car is almost always one of the last in the parking lot at Kurt Weiss. And between putting in long hours at the greenhouse and fulfilling his duties with the Long Island Farm Bureau, Bill is almost always working overtime.

“You’ve got to love what you’re doing, otherwise it’s work. And I think that’s

what drives him. He really does love what he’s doing,” Kirk says.

Bill has no plans to stop anytime soon. Retirement is nowhere on the horizon. “The way it’s going right now is just the perfect following of my life how I would like it to be,” he says. Through work with the Long Island Farm Bureau, he hopes to advance into other key leadership positions, whether that’s in the U.S. horticulture industry or in government or international works.

“I want to put my efforts to help better our industry and see it grow so that it just doesn’t disappear,” he says. “To be able to utilize my resources and my involvement with all the people that I’ve met in the industry and in the political sector, I want to try to pull them together to educate a lot of the politicians, as well as a lot of the public out there about our industry and help our industry grow. So if I can take that path and keep going down that road, that would be happiness.” 



Frank Collier, Pleasant  
Cove Nursery

# Communication & COLLABORATION

**Frank Collier** uses his skills to lift up his family's Pleasant Cove Nursery and the industry as a whole.

STORY BY MATT MCCLELLAN | PHOTOS BY ANGEL PARDUE

Pleasant Cove Nursery started in 1957 when John R. Collier, Frank's father, started growing plants in the basement of his Tennessee home. The nursery moved out of the house and into the backyard, and eventually grew into the 500-acre, 20-farm facility it is today. Once staffed solely with Collier family members, Pleasant Cove now employs more than 60 workers during peak seasons.

John and his wife Elma ran the nursery in the early days with their four sons, John Jr., Robert, Frank and David. Frank remembers it was tough in those early days, working as a kid in the fields.

Frank joined up for good after he finished college in the mid-70s. The nursery has changed a lot since then, but so has the industry. And the Colliers have always been able to adapt, whether it meant applying new research and technology or engineering a new solution.

"We've still got the first 'vineyard' tractor probably in the state of Tennessee," Frank laughs, "A Bungartz. It was a vineyard narrow tractor, with a Volkswagen engine. You see all kinds of them now, but a bit innovative for nursery use when we got it. I had a guy auditing us once and he wanted to know why this or that and I said, 'Look, they don't make things for nurserymen.'"

That's changed a bit, with Bouldin & Lawson just down the road making equipment to help the nursery industry automate. The Collier family still runs Pleasant Cove. Although John Jr. died in 2019, Robert, Frank and David carry on the Collier legacy of excellent nursery stock. The family always

made it a point to have ties with regional, state and national trade associations like The Middle Tennessee Nursery Association, Tennessee Nursery and Landscape Association, Southern Nursery Association and AmericanHort. Frank has served in various capacities and has become known as a champion of research, including a stint as president of the Horticultural Research Institute. In 2011, Frank was inducted into the TNLA Hall of Fame.

"Frank has worked tirelessly on funding for HRI with much success," says Michael Lorance, owner of Cherry Springs Nursery, another Tennessee-based wholesale nursery. "Additionally, he was instrumental in securing funding for the Nursery Research Station in McMinnville, Tennessee and the staffing required to make it the reality it is today."

From a national perspective, the nursery industry is perpetually overlooked. It's typically tucked under the agriculture umbrella as "specialty crops," where it has to fight for every scrap of funding that makes it down through the Farm Bill.

"One of our old researchers, retired now, says 'If you're not sows, plows and cows, you don't count in the state of Tennessee' — and most likely any other state," Frank says.

Frank is well-equipped for that fight for funding. He's been doing it a while. Craig Regelbrugge, senior vice president for government relations at AmericanHort, has known Frank for 30 years and sees him as a kindred spirit — someone able to speak the language of politics, understand the systems in place, and willing to use them to carve out a piece for the nursery industry.

"Frank is one of the most politically astute individuals in the industry," Craig says. "In an old-school way, but I mean

## FRANK COLLIER



Frank was instrumental in securing funding for the Nursery Research Station in McMinnville. He's also implemented some of the center's R&D findings at his own nursery.

that positively. He's all about relationships and quiet but effective influence.”

Craig sees the research center as a large part of Frank's legacy as a nurseryman who understands the value of research and development and wants the industry to keep striving to improve itself.

“He was instrumental in the successful effort to establish the Nursery Crops Research Station at McMinnville, and for that matter, the Floriculture and Nursery Research Initiative, a legacy that has grown in impact and continues on.”

### **A resource for Tennessee**

McMinnville is known as the heart of Tennessee's nursery country. That makes it an ideal spot for a nursery research station. Built on the 87-acre site of a former commercial nursery, The Otis L. Floyd Nursery Research Center is a facility dedicated to the improvement of the Tennessee nursery crop industry. It is located approximately 80 miles southeast of Nashville on the edge of the Cumberland Plateau.

Through partnerships with the Tennessee nursery industry, Tennessee State University, the USDA, and state and local governments, the necessary political, social and economic support was assembled to construct the research station. In addition to considerable support from the Tennessee nursery industry, the Center has received donations from nursery growers across the U.S.

“We hooked up politically with Dr. Otis Floyd who was chancellor and president at TSU and made it happen,” Frank says. “It's a good deal for the industry. Plus, it connects all over the country. Oregon, California, Ohio, to Beltsville, Maryland. I'm very proud



of that. Hopefully we get these young people to keep it going, keep it funded.”

Construction of the laboratory/administration building began in 1994. The 20,000 square foot building has 10 laboratories, offices for 12 scientists, a 200-seat auditorium, and 12,000 square feet of greenhouse space. Other facilities include a state-of-the-art pesticide mixing and storage facility, a fire ant quarantine facility, soil mixing/composting facility, shade houses, propagation houses, irrigated container yards, a pot-in-pot yard, and an equipment/maintenance shed. The entire site is plumbed for irrigation using either well water or municipal water.

Frank says a nursery advisory group meets with the station’s director to provide input on potential research projects for its scientists.

“Our station is unique in a lot of ways,” Frank says. “It’s got a great staff and

a great director. We’ve got Tennessee Department of Ag plant industry inspectors there on the site. We’ve got extension there on the site, which is really good for the scientists to be able to talk to the inspectors and vice versa. It’s a one-stop shop.”

As the Nursery Research Center expands, specialists in other disciplines will be added. The areas that are currently prioritized are agricultural mechanization, pesticide/environmental sciences, applied plant physiology, and additional pathology and entomology programs.

Facilities planned for the future include student housing, storage areas for scientist’s field supplies, increased shade house and greenhouse capacity, and overwintering structures for containerized field research material.

The Nursery Research Center is only about 20 minutes from Pleasant Cove Nursery. And Frank has made sure his nursery has implemented some of the station’s R&D findings. From the use of cover crops between rows in the field to protection from soilborne diseases and insect pests, to crop improvements in boxwood and viburnum and a hydrangea breeding program, the scientists have completed very useful projects.

### Another collaborative effort

Frank was also one of the key industry forces behind the creation and early growth of the Floriculture and Nursery Research Initiative (FNRI).

In 1996, the American Nursery and Landscape Association (ANLA), the Society of American Florists (SAF) and the Ohio Florists Association (OFA) launched the proposal when they asked U.S. Department of Agriculture - Agricultural Research Services (USDA-ARS) for research help. The resulting partnership has lasted more than 20 years. In March 2018, FNRI received \$1 million in funding as part of the spending bill passed by Congress.

Peter K. Bretting, USDA-ARS National program leader for plant genetic resources, is one of nine national program

leaders that constitute crop production and protection. He was the lead USDA-ARS researcher for the FNRI from its inception in 1998 until the mid-2000s.

“It was meant from the inception to be sharply focused on the needs of industry,” Peter says. “ARS would handle research, whether it was feasible, how to go about it in terms of scientific approach, and the industry provided input about relevance.”

As the FNRI was being established and thereafter, Peter and the other researchers received guidance from Frank and other industry leaders about the types of projects upon which they should focus their efforts. Those communications were important because they helped ARS know what the most important priorities were for the green industry. It was a collective effort and it grew into a well-functioning partnership.

Frank’s sterling reputation as a nurseryman and collaborator made him the perfect person to coordinate between all the stakeholders in the initiative and ensure everyone was rowing in the same direction.

“He rapidly established himself as a trusted and discreet partner,” Peter says. “Some of the early discussions were quite complicated and had to be dealt with carefully and adeptly. Frank had such a reputation among industry and universities, UT and Tennessee State and with us, that he played a key role in fostering communication so that all the many players in the initiative were aligned along the same effort.”

Some of Frank’s reputation was due to being part of a community of straight shooters: nurserymen who forged substantial deals with a handshake because generations of trust. But he also earned that reputation through his actions and his ability to communicate.

“It’s watching him in action,” Peter says. “If he said he would do something, he would do it in a very capable way. If there wasn’t a clear path to a particular goal, he’d let you know that right away. And collectively we would work on a different approach.”



If the research team ever had a question or hit a snag that involved the green industry crops, their first step was to pick up the phone and talk with Frank to seek his advice on how to proceed. On the other hand, if something potentially controversial or contentious was emerging, they would hear about it early from him.

“He was very good at establishing people as colleagues rather than adversaries,” Peter says. “That was really critical, especially at the beginning of this when there was some misunderstanding or lack of information on what the initiative meant and what its focus was. He was very effective in communicating that to a broad spectrum of industry colleagues and university colleagues too. Of course, he surely promoted the effort in Tennessee, but he was also always looking at the broader picture. He would work on behalf of the more local interests, but the regional and national interests, too. He was really quite selfless in that regard. That contributed to widespread trust of him, his advice and his ideas about how to proceed.”

For many years, Dr. Judy St. John was a high-level official at the USDA-ARS, and the industry’s primary champion for FNRI.

“Frank established a superb relationship with Judy,” Craig Regelbrugge says. “In fact, I can’t swear to this, but he may have been the one to give her the nickname ‘Mother Nature,’ which stuck with her for the rest of her career and to this day.”

For his part, Frank is thankful to Dr. St. John and the other ARS scientists for all the work they did for the industry.

“She was a keeper,” Frank says. “She’s always helped the small crop growers like us. Judy St. John and ARS have been really good to us on specialty crops funding and research.”



Pleasant Cove Nursery grows more than 375 varieties of plants in Rock Island, Tennessee, including a huge selection of field and container-grown evergreen shrubs like junipers and boxwood.

### Looking to the future

Frank hopes the next generation of nurserymen will continue the commitment to research that has served the industry well. He also has advice for the next generation.

“Ask a lot of questions,” he says. “Don’t be bashful.”

He also suggests visiting other nurseries in other parts of the country to see how they operate. You can pick up a lot of information that way, and many of the little things are done differently from place to place.

“A friend of mine’s son, he’s a good kid. I told him, ‘Buddy, you need to go to another nursery for a couple years, at least two or three,’” Frank says. “And he went for a year, came back afterwards and said ‘Thank you.’”

The nursery industry’s efforts to honor its past and commit to its own future is easily seen at HRI’s annual meeting each year. Nursery owners in attendance make pledges of substantial funds for research, often in memory of parents or in honor of their children.

“Instead of saying ‘I’m going to buy myself a new boat or motorcycle,’ they’ll say ‘I pledge \$50,000 in the name of father, mother or child on behalf of research,’” Peter says. “As a researcher I can’t think of a more committed group of industry folks.”

The Collier family has its own named endowment fund, the Elma E. and John R. Collier Memorial Trust Fund. And Frank has plenty of hope for the future.

“I think this shows, this virus deal, that we’re essential,” he says. “If you’re stuck at home, you can plant some plants, trees, vegetable crops. The whole nation will figure that out sooner or later.”

Still, even in an age of virtual trade shows and videoconferences, the skills that make Frank such a successful leader are good as gold.

“The influence Frank had been able to wield, that was interpersonal,” Peter says. “How can you do it in days like these when you can’t look a person clearly in their eye, share a meal or have a drink or two and forge those relationships of strong trust? We haven’t come up with a technological fix for that.”



# NOMINATE AN OUTSTANDING LEADER

## FOR THE HILA CLASS OF 2021

**T**he Horticultural Industries Leadership Awards (HILA), sponsored by Syngenta, is the only North American awards program to honor leaders from the greenhouse and nursery industries. Six award winners will be honored in these industry sectors in North America.

HILA recipients have made significant contributions to the horticulture industry, such as furthering its development with their innovation and expertise, excelling in environmental stewardship, enhancing the lives of employees, customers, communities and the industry at large with their charitable giving, and/or otherwise making a positive impact on the industry.

Is there a nursery or greenhouse grower you think should join the Horticultural Industries Leadership Awards Class of 2021? Email the following information to [HILA@gie.net](mailto:HILA@gie.net) to nominate them today!

- Person nominating
- Email/phone number of person nominating
- Company of person nominating
- Nominee name
- Nominee email
- Nominee phone number
- Nominee company name
- In your own words, please explain in detail why you think this person deserves to win a HILA.

# HILA PAST

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## CLASS OF 2018



**BARBARA JEFFERY-GIBSON**

Jeffery's Greenhouses  
St. Catharines, Ontario



**PETER ORUM**

Midwest Groundcovers  
St. Charles, Illinois



**JIM MONROE**

Greenbrier Nurseries  
Talcott, West Virginia



**NANCY BULEY**

J. Frank Schmidt & Son  
Boring, Oregon



**AMY MORRIS**

Heimos Greenhouse/  
Millstadt Young Plants  
Millstadt, Illinois



**JOHN HOFFMAN**

Hoffman Nursery  
Rougemont, North Carolina

# WINNERS

2018-2019

## CLASS OF 2019



**DOUG COLE**

D.S. Cole Growers  
Loudon, New Hampshire



**DALE DEPPE**

Spring Meadow Nursery  
Grand Haven, Michigan



**GEORGE LUCAS**

Lucas Greenhouses  
Monroeville, New Jersey



**ALAN JONES**

Manor View Farm  
Monkton, Maryland



**ART VAN WINGERDEN**

Metrolina Greenhouses  
Huntersville, North Carolina



**TERRI MCENANEY**

Bailey Nurseries  
St. Paul, Minnesota



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