



HORTICULTURAL INDUSTRIES
Leadership Awards 

Supplement to the July 2021 issues of:

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PREVENT PESTS WITH MAINSRING GNL



A broad-spectrum insecticide, Mainspring® GNL shields greenhouse and nursery crops from chewing and sucking insects.

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- Long-lasting control (8-12 weeks as a drench)
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Mainspring® GNL
Insecticide

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CONGRATULATIONS TO THE CLASS OF 2021

The continual evolution of the horticulture industry never stops. And just like the needs and interests of retailers and consumers keep changing, so do the challenges you face. Your ongoing commitment to this industry – and to meeting the needs of your customers – strengthens our commitment to do the same by delivering innovative and reliable solutions for your operations.

For the fifth consecutive year, we are honored to partner with *Greenhouse* and *Nursery Management* to recognize the extraordinary individuals who have made significant achievements in the horticulture industry. Congratulations to the Class of 2021 Horticultural Industries Leadership Award winners: **TBD**.

It's no question that 2020 was a difficult year for so many, but despite the challenges, these recipients demonstrated exceptional leadership and commitment, positively impacting customers, businesses and the industry as a whole. Due to the pandemic and stay-at-home orders, many consumers took to home gardening, which created a positive surge for the horticulture industry. This growth in home gardening led to an increased demand for ornamental crops from retailers and consumers, and this year's winners successfully navigated these demands and increased pressures.

Syngenta remains committed to meeting your needs in this ever-changing industry. We continue to introduce new agronomic programs to help control the most common pests that affect crops like poinsettias, spring bedding plants, mums and roses. 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. Additionally, as a result of our continued investment in research and development, we will be introducing a new innovative fungicide in the near future. With two modes of action, it will provide strong and reliable control of diseases such as *Fusarium*, leaf spots, Botrytis and more while also suppressing certain bacterial diseases.

Lastly, we want to help greenhouse and nursery operations succeed by maximizing profitability through our GreenTrust® 365 program, which allows you to earn year-long rebates on product purchases. While you work to keep operations insect- and disease-free, we're by your side with the tools and support to help you succeed.

Again, congratulations to the recipients of the 2021 Horticultural Industries Leadership Awards! Thank you for the vital role you play in growing strong, healthy and beautiful plants. 🌱



Tripp Trotter

Head of Marketing, *Turf and Ornamental*
Syngenta



PREPARING FOR A HEALTHY ROSE CROP

A well-planned agronomic program can protect these popular flowering ornamentals from pathogens and pests.

The rose has long been a symbol for love and romance, serving as an iconic and lucrative ornamental for commercial growers.

But as much as it has achieved universally beloved status, the rose can be a challenging crop to produce. With production occurring year-round, greenhouse and nursery crews must be vigilant about the pests and diseases biding their time to attack.

Comprehensive agronomic programs can be a critical tool to keep roses protected. An effective program includes insecticides and fungicides, as well as time-tested cultural practices – spacing, scouting, and more – to ensure a high-quality production cycle.

“Scouting and early diagnosis of infected plants are critical for preventing the spread of rose diseases and implementing effective disease control strategies,” says Fulya Baysal-Gurel, research assistant professor at Tennessee State University. “Humidity, temperature and light management, as well as spacing, sanitation practices, and preventive fungicide applications, are all important for controlling rose diseases.”

SCOUT FOR THE SIGNS

“Roses are cultivated in greenhouses and outdoor nurseries, with successful growing seasons characterized by careful planning,” notes Nancy Rechcigl, technical field manager for ornamentals at Syngenta. The key to preparation is knowing the signs of an infestation or infection, especially of frequent rose challenges such as mites, whiteflies, downy mildew and powdery mildew.

Mites, particularly the two-spotted spider mite (*Tetranychus urticae*), are voracious feeders that thrive in hot, dry environments. Their color can vary from a light yellow to yellow-green, with two dark spots on the abdomen. They can be found feeding on the underside of rose leaves.

Damage from two-spotted spider mites appear as tiny yellow-white spots or “stippling” on the upper foliage. Infestations that become severe often have noticeable webbing in the plant canopy, which serves as protection from predators. Heavily infested leaflets turn yellow and will drop from the plant.

If left untreated, foliage damage can lead to leaf loss and, eventually, plant death.

Whiteflies are another prolific nuisance for roses. The greenhouse whitefly (*Trialeurodes vaporariorum*) and the silverleaf whitefly (*Bemisia tabaci*) are the two most commonly seen in greenhouse and outdoor nursery spaces, with the silverleaf whitefly being the most dominant. There are two biotypes of the Silverleaf (B and Q) that can be found in operations. Biotype Q can be more difficult to control since it is more tolerant to some of the insecticides commonly used in operations.

“The adult and immature stages feed on the underside of leaves and cause leaves to turn yellow in a blotchy pattern,” says Rechcigl. “Whiteflies also excrete honeydew from their feeding.

For help with disease control and proper fungicide use, consult the Syngenta Fungicide Guide: [GreenCastOnline.com/FungicideGuide](https://www.syngenta.com/FungicideGuide)



Spider mites are often found feeding on the underside of rose leaves. Watch for tiny yellow-white spots or “stippling” on the upper foliage. Severe infestations may produce webbing in the plant canopy, and heavily infested leaflets turn yellow and will drop from the plant.

This drops to the upper surface of leaves, making them sticky and giving them a shiny appearance. You may notice ants crawling up and down the plant to feed on the honeydew.”

On the disease front, roses are a frequent target of **downy mildew** – caused by the oomycete *Peronospora sparsa*. This can be a very serious disease if roses become infected. Early symptoms include foliage that has a reddish or yellow blotchy or mottled appearance.

“If you turn the leaf over, you’ll likely see some gray-pink sporulation on its underside, which corresponds with the blotchy areas,” says Rechcigl. As the disease progresses, the plant will defoliate, leaving it weak and unsalable.

Another mildew that infects roses is **powdery mildew**, caused by *Sphaerotheca pannosa* var. *rosae* (also known as *Podosphaera pannosa*). As the name implies, this pathogen produces a powdery, white growth on the upper surface of leaves,

stems and flower parts. This disease can spread rapidly, and if left untreated, the pathogen will stunt and disfigure leaves and rose buds, stopping them from opening and greatly reducing plant quality.

“Proper identification of a pest or disease problem is critical for effective control,” says Rechcigl. Without it, you run the risk of making a “control” application that will not actually help, instead letting the problem get worse.

FOR BEST RESULTS

A well-rounded agronomic program incorporates chemical products that can avert harmful infestations before they begin. A best-in-class management strategy features three or more products – including an effective miticide like Avid® 0.15 EC, or a fungicide such as Segovis® or Mural® – with different modes of action.

Not only does this optimize control, but it also helps decrease the chances that resistance will become an issue – a risk

for highly produced ornamentals like roses exacerbated by overreliance on a single product.

“Pathogen resistance to fungicides is well known, and the performance of many fungicides has been affected to some degree by pathogens developing resistance,” says Baysal-Gurel. “Using different modes of action in a rotation program is important to minimize the risk for resistance development.”

To manage powdery mildew in roses, spray applications of a preventative fungicide like Mural are typically made on a one- to three-week interval, depending on disease severity and whether the crops are being grown in a greenhouse or nursery. “This way, growers can extend their treatment interval while maintaining good protection from the fungus,” says Baysal-Gurel.

Mural is a broad-spectrum fungicide for use in both greenhouses and outdoor nurseries. Due to its systemic and trans-

Agronomic programs

Syngenta has developed several agronomic programs to assist with your nursery and greenhouse management. These programs have been researched and tested by technical experts to:

- Offer comprehensive, long-lasting management of insects and disease affecting your operation or specific crop

- Rotate modes of action to help prevent the onset of resistance and preserve valuable chemistries
- Focus on the best preventive treatments to help save time and resources compared to curative treatments

Access those agronomic programs here:
[GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions)

laminar (or ability to distribute the chemical from upper to lower leaf surfaces) activity, Mural protects the entire plant, whether applied as a spray or drench.

Segovis fungicide, meanwhile, is a reliable treatment for downy mildew. Providing a month's worth of control due to systemic properties, Segovis is best applied as a drench.

A study at Tennessee State University evaluated the efficacy of Segovis and additional fungicides on rose downy mildew, with drench treatments applied at the first sign of infection. While all fungicide treatments significantly reduced final disease severity ratings, Baysal-Gurel says, the severity of downy mildew as well as disease progression were significantly lower in plants treated with Segovis.

"Benefits of using a drench application of systemic products in a treatment program were clear: One application provided excellent protection to rose plants for 30 days," she says.

Battling mites by chemical means requires an industry-leading miticide like Avid, which also safeguards roses from the hungry depredations of whiteflies, aphids and thrips. The highly versatile, broad-spectrum pest control product targets the mite life cycle when swapped with insecticides carrying disparate modes of action.

"Avid's use rate is about 8 to 16 fluid ounces per acre. For resistance management purposes, I recommend two applications, then rotate to a different product for two or three applications before going back to Avid," Rechcigl says.

PREVENTION IS KEY

Proper cultural practices can further mitigate the challenges growers are likely to face from insects and disease. For example, no matter the production scenario, removing plant and weed debris should be the first step taken by any grower.

Equally important is plant spacing, which is vital for allowing air flow between plants, effectively reducing humidity within the rose canopy and incidence of foliar disease.

Coupled with crop protection tools and a strong agronomic program, these routines can save growers time, money and stress.



Powdery mildew can spread rapidly, and if left untreated, the pathogen will stunt and disfigure leaves and rose buds, stopping them from opening and greatly reducing plant quality.



Early symptoms of downy mildew on roses include foliage that has a reddish or yellow blotchy or mottled appearance. In the left photo, the rose is just starting to show signs of downy mildew. The photo on the right shows how the pathogen has spread and caused serious damage.

"If you're prepared, you'll be ready to act when you see a problem or prevent a problem from occurring," says Rechcigl. "Preventing a problem is always less expensive than making corrective applications." 🌱

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WATCH OUT FOR WHITEFLIES

Combine insecticides and cultural solutions to help rid your operation of this damaging pest.

Whiteflies are prolific pests for many greenhouse and nursery crops. In large populations, they spread disease and suck out plant juices, causing leaves to yellow and shrivel before potentially killing the plant. These insects reproduce rapidly and reside on the underside of leaves, making them difficult to control.

A pest like whiteflies requires a comprehensive approach to stave off rising populations, pairing chemical controls such as Mainspring® GNL insecticide with proven cultural practices.

“Many operations use biological controls as part of their pest management program, but there are times when whitefly populations can become too high for a biological program to manage on its own,” says Nancy Rechcigl, technical field manager for ornamentals at Syngenta. “There are tools that can be used to reduce or control pests without having negative effects on beneficial insects. Mainspring GNL is a good product for that – it’s been

tested across predatory mites and parasitoids and has good overall compatibility with biological control agents.”

Although there are numerous species of whiteflies in the U.S., the greenhouse whitefly (*Trialeurodes vaporariorum*) and the silverleaf whitefly (*Bemisia tabaci*) are the two most commonly seen in greenhouse and outdoor nursery spaces. The silverleaf whitefly has multiple biotypes of the same species, with B and Q being the most encountered genetic variations. These biotypes look identical, but they can react very differently to chemical treatments – adding to the complexity of control.

While lab tests can help growers identify and understand which biotypes they are dealing with, “it’s not uncommon to have a mixed population at an ornamental facility,” Rechcigl says. “So, what’s really important is creating a good rotation program with insecticides that have activity on both biotypes.”

MONITOR THE SIGNS

Scouting for whiteflies can be as simple as seeing what emerges after tapping a crop canopy.

Like many insects, whiteflies have immature and adult stages. Adults lay eggs on the underside of leaves, which hatch and release tiny scale-like crawlers that settle into a spot and begin feeding. Over time, they become larger in size, going through three additional nymphal stages before emerging as an adult.

“You want to monitor for adults because it’s important to know if and when they’re present in your growing area,” says Rechcigl. “The best way to do that is by placing yellow sticky cards just above the height of the plant canopy. This is a helpful tool, because it can be used to also monitor other flying pests such as thrips.”

Consultant Scott Ferguson says whiteflies dine upon a wide range of host plants. Many crops are susceptible, including poinsettias, gardenias, lantana, verbena, mandevilla and hibiscus. The tiny pests may also be found on cotton, peanut

crops, and other vegetable plants.

“Here in Florida, every acre of tomatoes is treated with insecticide to control whiteflies, but we still have to turn over leaves to look for adults,” says Ferguson, an industry veteran who previously spent more than two decades with Syngenta.

Whiteflies at both the adult and immature stage have piercing-sucking mouthparts, which they insert into the plant phloem to extract sap. Nymphs cause the majority of damage, including leaf loss, reduced expansion, chlorotic spots on the top side of leaves, and discoloration or slivering. If whitefly numbers per leaf are large enough, they can do enough damage to kill the plant.

Whitefly adults can also transmit viruses from diseased to healthy plants through their mouthparts. Similar to aphids, whiteflies excrete honeydew, a sweet substance that forms a sticky coating on leaves. Honeydew is often colonized by sooty mold, giving plants a black and dirty appearance. Though generally harmless, an abundance of sooty mold fungus prevents light from reaching the leaf surface, causing plant stress and eventual death.

High populations of whiteflies also draw ants, which feed on the honeydew and even protect pests from their natural enemies.

“You’ll see a shiny gloss on leaves below where the whiteflies are feeding,” says Rechigl. “That’s the kind of activity you have to watch out for.”

THE BEST DEFENSE

Year-round pests, whiteflies can rapidly overwhelm unprepared nurseries and greenhouses because of how quickly they mature from the egg stage to adults (as few as 21 days). Understanding this lifecycle can help growers prevent or mitigate infestations.

Cultural controls and good sanitation practices may moderate the severity of a whitefly invasion, but chemical products are necessary to eliminate the problem. Ferguson suggests rotating insecticides based on their activity and strengths,



Whiteflies reproduce rapidly and reside on the underside of leaves, but a combination of cultural practices and chemical applications will help control infestations.

meaning growers must study labels closely to ensure they’re choosing the right product.

“Make sure you use a material that controls whiteflies and doesn’t just suppress them,” says Ferguson. “Suppression will give you less than 70% to 80% coverage. Products that say ‘control’ are 90% effective.”

Mainspring GNL, a diamide insecticide, provides whitefly control as a non-neonicotinoid alternative for growers, acting as ryanodine receptor modulators

Refer to the Syngenta Whitefly Solutions Guide for more information. It’s also an excellent source to share with anyone on your production team that is responsible for scouting and treating pests.

Find it here:
<http://bit.ly/whitefly-guide>



Whiteflies mature into adults in as few as 21 days.

Consider these cultural practices for better whitefly control:

- **Maintain weed-free production areas. Whiteflies feed on numerous hosts, so eliminate potential sites of contamination.**
- **Inspect new shipments of plants. If possible, isolate new stock for 1-2 weeks allowing time for any existing nymphs to develop so that they are more easily seen.**
- **Adults are mobile, so use screens in greenhouses to help exclude populations.**
- **Monitor egg and nymph populations by checking the underside of leaves with a hand lens. Monitor for adults with yellow sticky cards.**

in the whitefly nervous system. With a unique active ingredient in Insecticide Resistance Action Committee (IRAC) Group 28, Mainspring GNL is ideal for integrated pest management programs that incorporate multiple modes of action.

Rechcigl says, “Mainspring GNL works via ingestion and acts like a shield. When whiteflies ingest the active ingredient, they’re prevented from feeding. This is going to keep populations from building to high levels.”

As a foliar spray, Mainspring GNL works best when applied sequentially in two- to three-week intervals. Drench applications for rooted plants provide broad-spectrum control for up to 12 weeks, preventing damage from whiteflies as well as thrips, aphids, leafminers and more. Upon use, insect mortality occurs within two to seven days. Mainspring GNL can also be used in an integrated program with biologicals like *Amblyseius swirskii*, a predatory mite, or *Eretmocerus* or *Encarsia spp.*, both parasitoids, often utilized to combat whitefly populations.

“For poinsettias in the field, you want to use Mainspring GNL two to three weeks after transplanting once the crop has rooted in,” Ferguson says. “It can also

be applied through drip irrigation where you’re injecting it into the water. Because Mainspring GNL gives you long residual control, it’s way easier to maintain control before whiteflies show up.”

That’s not to say chemicals are an end-all for managing whitefly infestations. Implementing proper cultural practices – be it keeping weed-free production areas, inspecting new plant shipments, or installing screens to stop insects from entering a nursery – can deliver additional critical protection.

Ultimately, a preventive approach, will save growers time and resources compared to strictly curative treatments.

“Trying to control a high pest population costs more than preventing it from reaching damaging levels,” says Rechcigl. “If you wait until populations are at a critical stage, then more control applications will be needed, especially if you’re using sprays. So you’ll have cost of product plus labor to reduce out-of-control populations.” 🌱

Learn more at [GreenCastOnline.com/MainspringGNL](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/MainspringGNL).

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Protect your plants during propagation with strong cultural practices and preventive fungicide applications.

A CLEAN, HEALTHY START

Keep your propagation material in top shape with a fungicide that prevents disease and provides plant health benefits.

When greenhouse and nursery plants are at their healthiest during propagation, they have the necessary building blocks to develop a strong root system and turn into valuable finished crops. However, protecting plants before and during propagation can be a challenge, especially when transportation and growth environments can easily become conducive for disease development.

“Despite the best planning and efforts for seamless delivery from farms to greenhouses, it’s inevitable in the business of spring production that your cutting deliveries may become delayed,” explains Jamie Gibson, technical lead at Syngenta Flowers. “An extra day or two in transit can create several issues

for plant species that are susceptible to ethylene damage or tissue breakdown. Fungicide sprays should be applied as soon as cuttings are rehydrated and turgid to help minimize *Botrytis* problems on damaged leaf tissues.”

Once propagation begins, unrooted cuttings, seedlings and liners generally require warm temperatures and frequent misting or high humidity for proper rooting. But this warm, humid environment also provides optimal conditions for spores of pathogenic agents to germinate, invading wounds and tender plant tissue. During propagation, plants may be at risk of developing various diseases, including foliar blights caused by *Botrytis cinerea*, leaf spots caused by *Alternaria*, *Colletotrichum* and *Myrothecium* spp., as well as lower stem rots. Seedlings are also at risk of damping-off from *Pythium*, *Phytophthora* and *Rhizoctonia* spp. when the growing media is wet for a prolonged period.

Adopting strong cultural practices and employing preventive fungicide applications can help growers maintain a successful crop throughout production. And with the proper selection of fungicides used as part of an agronomic program, growers not only protect plants against pathogens but may even boost their crop’s overall health.

“Plant health benefits are additional advantages from the treatment that occur above and beyond disease protection,” says Gibson. “One example of a plant health benefit is enhanced rooting. Faster root development could result in a shorter crop time, as well as the production of more fibrous roots, which aid in nutrient and water uptake, and better growth. The additional benefits are due to positive effects on the plant’s physiology, which can vary according to plant species and growing environment.”

Strobilurin fungicides are best known for providing these plant health benefits as well as lower rates of transpiration, which maximize the efficiency of water use, and increased nitrate reductase levels in plants, which allows nitrates to be more readily available to produce proteins essential to plant growth.

“Strobilurin fungicides also reduce the production of ethylene, which delays senescence, consequently improving growth and plant vigor because of increased production of carbohydrates within the plant,” says Charlie Krasnow, research and development scientist at Syngenta. “These particular benefits promote better resilience in plants, which help them hold up better during shipping and improves shelf life at retail.”

Mural® fungicide from Syngenta features a combination of azoxystrobin and SOLATENOL® technology.

Azoxystrobin, a well-known strobilurin chemistry, is systemic and offers xylem mobile movement, meaning it is absorbed by the plant and translocated upward to protect new growth. SOLATENOL technology is an advanced generation SDHI (succinate dehydrogenase inhibitor), which binds to the waxy layer of plants



Stronger poinsettia roots

During a fungicide performance trial in summer 2018, poinsettia cuttings were sprayed once, four days after stick, to protect the plant from foliar and stem diseases. After 21 days, researchers inspected the plants for growth and root development and found that Mural had significantly greater root development than the control in the absence of disease. Lower rates of Heritage 2 oz. and Mural 4 oz. had the highest root density out of all the treatments, and plants treated with Mural at 4 oz. also showed an increase in height.



If your cuttings are delayed in transit, apply a fungicide spray as soon as cuttings are rehydrated and turgid to help minimize *Botrytis* issues.



Mural is labeled for vegetables grown for transplant.

and slowly penetrates the tissue, creating a barrier of protection.

This combination makes Mural ideal for inhibiting spore germination and mycelial growth during propagation and throughout production, by providing protection for the plant inside and out.

“The active ingredient combination has a synergistic relationship. We worked hard to optimize this ratio,” Krasnow adds.

Interestingly, plant health benefits, such as root enhancement, are more often seen at lower use rates. Mural provides

broad-spectrum disease control and offers plant health benefits at rates of just 4 oz. (foliar) or 2-3 oz. (drench), which are rates typically used on young plants in production for effective disease control.

“The technical team at Syngenta Flowers is a big advocate of Mural as we have seen its use be tremendously beneficial in managing *Botrytis* on several large cash crops such as geraniums, hanging baskets and potted flowering crops, especially when there are older chemistries that have been shown to be resistant to *Botrytis*,”

Gibson adds. “Protecting umbels of geranium, hydrangea and pentas is critical during spring when the disease triangle (host, pathogen, environment) is present.”

In addition to *Botrytis*, Mural also provides effective control of downy mildew, *Pythium* and *Rhizoctonia* in rotation programs for ornamentals and vegetable plants grown for transplant including cucurbits, peppers, eggplant and tomatoes.

With its broad-spectrum disease control and plant health benefits, including increased root density, Mural is an ideal fungicide for use in propagation as a spray or as a drench. Its many use sites make it a versatile option for any grower. Learn how to get more with Mural at [GreenCastOnline.com/Mural](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Mural). *

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AN EXCEPTIONAL CLASS OF LEADERS *in* HORTICULTURE

Leadership comes in many types. But the best leaders have a few traits in common. They stay calm in a crisis. They don't overreact, even when the news is bad. They are able to assess the problem and work through potential solutions. 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 2021. Now in its fifth 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.



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LLOYD R. TRAVEN



FOR THE **BIGGER**
THE **PICTURE**

Lloyd Traven pictured at Peace Tree Farms

RE

Lloyd Traven strives to empower the next generation and do business his way at Peace Tree Farms.

BY CHRIS MANNING

Lloyd Traven didn't plan on working in the horticulture industry. The son of a Russian Jewish immigrant father and an American mother, Traven originally planned to become a doctor. In fact, Lloyd was in college taking medical classes and plants were not on his radar.

"For us, it was all about education," Traven says. "So if you work hard enough and apply yourself, you can be a doctor and if you're not a doctor you don't have a job. At least that was my father's idea."

"That was where I was headed. I was going to be a thoracic surgeon. It was all ordained and decided and organized. And then I met a girl."

According to Lloyd, it was within a few minutes of meeting Candy, his now wife of 43 years, that he was going to marry her. Candy was into plants — she says she gave him a coleus that he almost killed once they started dating — and Lloyd decided he was going to dedicate his life to whatever Candy liked.

"It was in the '70s and that was the last big plant boom — everyone had to create their own paradise," Candy says. "I had given him a coleus and he had a great room with a wonderful window. And the plant wilted and he called me all frantic saying 'it's limp and hanging, what do I do?'. I said 'try water' and of course it came back."

"So I left the medical world in the dust as quickly as I could," he says. "I went back to school for floriculture. I went to graduate school at Cornell in floriculture."

After college, Lloyd and Candy moved to Chicago, where he worked for Ball Horticultural and was involved in early plug development. But something changed.

"Once I figured out the people who hired me had left, I figured out the people now in charge of me didn't understand my personality," Lloyd says, noting that he loved working for Ball. "I'm always looking at something new, I'm always looking to learn something and try new things. What they wanted to do was shoehorn me into a position. Once you are in that position, that's what you do. And I didn't want that."

LLOYD R. TRAVEN



Founding Peace Tree Farm

In 1983, Lloyd and Candy started looking for their own place to grow and be their own bosses. After one day of looking, they found a farm for sale in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. They bought the farm soon after and have been there ever since. It also brought Lloyd back near South New Jersey where he was raised.

From his time at Ball and the early days of Peace Tree, Lloyd found that he loved horticulture because of how he could apply science and technology.

“You were kind of in control of it,” he explains. “While it was still bottom-line life and death, it’s not the same kind of life and death [as medicine]. Not even remotely close. But it required care and attention. And when I realized that there was a scientific base for everything and that you could work within other biologies and you could make it work for you, it was cool. And when I realized you could go to graduate school for this, it blew my mind.”

Lloyd’s father wasn’t on board at first with the career switch, openly wondering about how Lloyd would make a living and support a family. But with a play of nostalgia, his dad bought it.

“My grandparents, in Russia, were farmers. They raised chickens and had bees and made cheeses and butters. And



TOP: From left to right: Alex, Candy and Lloyd Traven with their two dogs at Peace Tree Farms.

BOTTOM: Potted lavender is one of many crops Peace Tree Farms sells in various sized pots to its retail customers, including retail chain Wegman’s.



Lloyd and Candy moved to what became Peace Tree Farms in 1983 from Chicago, where Lloyd worked for Ball.

they were peddlers — my grandma had a horse and wagon and she would drive around to sell general goods and farm products,” he says. “When I knew them, and they had moved to the U.S., they had a farm raising chickens and selling eggs near where I am now.”

“So my father had experienced them being interested [in farming]. And his hobby, of all things, was bonsai trees — the precision of it and forcing this plant to your will. The more we talked about it, the more I was able to remind him what interested him about it. I told him ‘agriculture is a calling and I’m feeling that calling.’” Lloyd’s father died in 1995 and ultimately saw the farm grow and expand for over a decade, inching toward being the business it is today.

Around this time, Lloyd and Candy had a son, Alex, who now works at the business in a managerial position. They also have an older son, Abraham, who lives in Boise, Idaho, and is a world-class rock climber and runs a gear store.

In 2021, Peace Tree Farm is an established business producing a mix of organic herbs, annuals, perennials and houseplants. Plants are mostly potted vs. being sold in flats. Over the course of 30 years, the growing process has been fine-tuned and perfected. In the 1990s and 2000s, as the business made a name for itself, it started moving more towards what it is today.

But in 1983, in year one of the business, it was more chaotic. According to Lloyd, they took over the business in early April — far too late in the game to dive into spring plant sales. That could have left Peace Tree facing a full year without income. But instead, Lloyd used connections he had at Ball to launch a line of plants unique to Peace Tree and, in theory, something different than what was readily available.

“I never wanted to be a bedding plant grower,” he says. “I can’t imagine breaking into the market with packs of annuals when I’ve got Dan Shantz and KubePak and major growers around us. We started out growing Rex begonias, English ivy that we made into topiary, and gerberas. We had a nice business with that.” They took on Ball genetics as well and for a time grew mums and poinsettias. They haven’t grown either in over two decades. They also grew basil in 3.5 inch pots from day one — at the instance of Candy — and sold 5,000 units in year one. Today, Peace Tree sells over 100,000 basil pots in a year, all of them certified organic.

“We figured out ways we could stand out totally from what everyone else is doing,” Lloyd says. “And we did that from day one.”

Empowering the next generation

For Lloyd, a key part of his introduction to the business was learning from the generation of growers that came before him. Back in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, that meant learning from people he worked with at Ball and then connecting with various potted herb growers pioneering the space 30 years ago.

Today, Lloyd works to pay back his knowledge by mentoring and empowering the next generation. One way he does is by working with Dr. Charlie Hall, Ellison Chair at Texas A&M University, and the students Hall works with.

“One of the best things about Lloyd — at least for me — is that you never doubt where you stand with him or what he’s thinking,” says Hall, who has known Lloyd for over two decades and has worked with him for the last 14 years. “He’s as honest as the day is long. It’s one of those things I really appreciate.”

Lloyd works with Hall on the advisory board for the Ellison Chair. Hall says that he invited Lloyd because of his honesty and willingness to call it like he sees it.

“When he disagrees with you, he’ll let you know,” Hall explains. “But if he does, he’ll do so



respectfully. A lot of times, the majority of times I'd say, it'll involve some type of humor. He's not afraid to disagree and he'll state his case, but also admit when he's wrong."

"With the people he really likes, he'll come up with nicknames," Hall adds. "So one of mine is 'Professor Silver Lining' because I always tend to find the positive factors in my economic outlooks, regardless of how dire the economic environment is."

With the younger growers, Hall says that Lloyd offers himself as a consistent resource as a way to give back to what was given to him.

"I have seen Lloyd personally mentor younger growers in the industry about their path forward or how best to control an insect or whatever the question is," Hall says. "It's rare for a grower to do so openly and readily. He's just very open with someone who walks up to him at Cultivate with a question. He takes time for that."

Someone he has worked with directly as they climbed the ladder is Brie Arthur. Today, Arthur is an author and horticulturist who focuses on evangelizing gardening to end consumers, giving presentations and detailing her work on Instagram at @BrieThePlantLady. But in 2008, when Lloyd met Arthur, she was working as a

grower and propagator at a greenhouse operation. At the time, Arthur says the industry was beginning to embrace networking online and the benefits of digital. She was a member of a Facebook group called 'Plant Porn' that Lloyd was helping to moderate.

"Lloyd was such an integral part of that and such a kind and supportive mentor to people of any age or experience," Arthur says. "He was someone I could come to with questions or concerns and he would give me impartial advice. It was years before I met him in person, but I had this significant relationship with him via digital means and he cultivated that relationship with a lot of people — especially people in my age group who were in their 20s and just starting out their careers and figuring out their lives."

Big picture thinking

Another part of Lloyd's ethos dating back to the early days of Peace Tree Farms: thinking outside the box.

On a day-to-day level, Lloyd empowered his son, Alex, to implement an integrated pest management program at the business. According to Alex, Lloyd let Alex shape the program and make it his own. It was something that he felt Alex was right for vs. him taking something on.

He adds that he and Lloyd are different. Both attended Cornell and they work together on all aspects of the business. But whereas Lloyd is more outgoing, Alex is more reserved. They view plants differently, too.

"He enjoys horticulture in a way that I don't," Alex says. "I love plants, I love gardening, but my view of it is much more utilitarian rather than mad collector. That has led to occasional conflicts where he loves a plant and I have to be the voice of reason saying 'ya well, there's a reason no one else grows it' or whatever it is. But I respect where he comes from and how far it's gotten the business, and how it sets us apart."

"Whatever we grow, Alex wants them to buy it because it's the best it can be, even if it's a plant we don't love," Lloyd

adds. “He’s more production oriented than I am.”

Lloyd has also been willing to work outside of standard marketing norms in the industry. In the past, Peace Tree Farm worked with more established brands, using their marketing programs. But over time, he and the rest of the Peace Tree operation wanted to expand beyond that and highlight more unique plants that don’t fit the cookie-cutter mold.

“How do I figure out how to grow enough stock and reach a number that’s sustainable,” he asks. “It’s one thing to do 10 pots, but it’s a whole other thing to do 500 pots. How do I commercialize so I can get 500 or 1,000 or 2,000? So we had this collection of amazing plants that we would get from all over the world.” When this program developed, word of mouth spread at flower shows and among botanical gardeners about Peace Tree’s unique offerings.

“It gave us huge notoriety,” Lloyd says. “We weren’t making a lot of money doing it. Herbs made the money.” But the business made it through, with Lloyd citing the great people as a reason why. And around 2008, after Peace Tree became certified organic, they began working with retail grocery chain Wegman’s to sell herbs. As part of their partner farm program — which puts Peace Tree in weekly ads and with a set place in Wegman’s stores — the business boomed.

“They came to us for these live organic herbs and we are on the branding on it,” Lloyd says, noting that they do herbs and vegetables for Wegman’s all up the East Coast in the spring. “We still do this now. We do two significant loads twice a week all year. It’s something that paid off years after we got started.”

Last year, Peace Tree went fully organic with its production, temporarily halting ornamental production and going all-in on herbs and vegetables. It was a big step and one that didn’t come without risks in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But thinking big again paid off, as it always seems to do.

“I thought we were going to go out of business — it was really grim,” Lloyd says.



“Even Wegman’s cut us off for about three weeks. But within four to five weeks, it was bigger than it ever was. In those sleepless nights, I was waking up at three in the morning and telling myself that Wegman’s was going to be open and any place that sells food will be open. Garden centers selling ornamentals might not. The next day, in the morning, I told everyone in a meeting what we were going to do and how we were going to adjust to it all.”

“I’m not thinking about today, I’m not thinking about tomorrow,” he says. “I’m thinking about three years or five years from now and how I can develop customers that will stick with us.” *



During the pandemic, Peace Tree halted plant production to go all in on herbs and fill what Lloyd saw as a glaring need.

TERRI BATES



Terri Bates, co-owner and third-generation caladium grower at Bates Sons & Daughters.

A devoted ally

Terri Bates combines instincts and confidence with generosity and grace to serve the industry she adores.

BY KELLI RODDA

One of only eight commercial caladium growers in the world, Terri Bates holds dear the business and life lessons passed down from her grandparents and parents. In chorus, she works feverishly to advance not just her business, but her competitors in the caladium market and the entire green industry.

Terri is a third-generation grower and co-owns Bates Sons & Daughters with her sister, Sheri. The pair operate the 100-acre caladium farm in Lake Placid, Florida, a business founded by their grandfather 77 years ago.

Her grandfather Emmett was working construction after World War II. He serendipitously attended a county extension meeting one evening, when someone in attendance suggested he try growing caladiums. He bought a \$50 bucket of bulbs – a hefty sum for those days – only to find that half of them were rotten. But good fortune prevailed, and some of those bulbs helped launch the family farm. Her grandparents raised two sons – Fred, who stayed in the family business (her uncle) and Don, who pursued a career in science (her father).

In 1978, Terri's grandfather asked Don to return home and help Fred run the family business, then called Bates and Sons. Fred was interested in expanding the business and a second person at the helm would have been quite beneficial. After much cogitating, Don agreed and moved his family back to Florida. Nearly a year later, Fred died in a car accident and Terri's parents found themselves fully immersed in the business. But Don and his wife Dot embraced the challenge and raised their girls to treasure and respect the family business.

After college, the girls carved their own path that led them away from the family farm.

“Our parents never pushed us to come into the business, but it was an unspoken invitation that we were welcome anytime,” Terri recalls.

Terri studied horticulture at the University of Florida and after graduation worked for vegetable growing operation owned by a large corporation. She eventually became the only female crop supervisor at that location. She gained a lot of experience in this role, but she felt her talents would be a better fit elsewhere. When a position for a horticulture extension agent in Highlands County popped up, she jumped at the chance.

“My favorite part of the job was working with the farmers. My least favorite part was completing the mountains of paperwork,” she says.

But after about two years of extension work, she had a yearning to return to her Lake Placid home and the family business. She joined her sister, who was already working alongside their parents, and the family was whole again. The foursome went about their daily routines. They didn't talk much about succession planning. Then one day in 1992, the sisters showed up for work and one word changed the course of the business.

“Dad had changed all the signs to Bates Sons & Daughters,” she says. “We had no idea he was going to do that.”

Don changed the company name and gave the girls more shares in the farm, but he wasn't quite ready to step down as leader. It took about 27 years for him to completely hand over the business to Terri and Sheri.

TERRI BATES

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At 85, Don still comes to work and, as Terri describes, “is a maniac on the forklift.”

“My parents don’t believe in retirement. But dad likes going out in the fields and running the trucks. I keep telling him, ‘I don’t need you for your labor, I need you for your brain,’ but he loves to get out there and work.”

The amount of caladium growers has dwindled since the sisters took over the business. It’s the not same market their dad experienced. To date, there are only eight commercial caladium farms in the world and seven are in Lake Placid, appropriately known as The Caladium Capital of the World. The eighth grower is in a neighboring county.

“In 2002 there were 21 caladium growers here. Then the state was hit with three hurricanes in 2004, one in 2005, and then came the recession and a major freeze, and another hurricane in 2017,” Terri explains. “Some couldn’t recover from that, there was some consolidation in the market, and some kids didn’t want to inherit the business.”

Honesty ... the best policy

Like most family businesses, Terri and Sheri experienced every job at the farm, absorbing valuable business and life lessons from mom and dad. Honesty was one of the most important traits the sisters learned from their parents.

“I’m *brutally* honest,” she says proudly. My customers will tell you this. Yeah, I may be brutally honest, but I’m honest, and so is my sister and so are my parents. We pride ourselves on ethics. I would rather lose money and do the right thing.”

Putting honesty at the center of the customer relationship is critical, but in a family business, it’s equally important to be honest with your kinfolk. Terri and Sheri don’t mince words when it comes to running the business.

“Learning how to work in a family business is difficult, but how we make it work is everyone has specific jobs, and we don’t cross over,” Terri explains. “Sheri runs the warehouse and does a wonderful job of it. I’m not touching that. She also

handles the money. I don’t touch that either. I handle the customers and a lot of the growing.”

Honesty is a trait that certainly served Terri and her customers well during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The first thing I did when greenhouses and nurseries started shutting down, I called every one of my customers and asked if they still wanted their orders, even if we had already potted their product. I wasn’t going to sell product to anyone who couldn’t sell it. I wasn’t going to force anyone to take product,” she explains. “We had some cancellations. One customer who cancelled asked me, ‘Are you going to ship to me next year?’ I said, ‘Of course. A pandemic isn’t your fault. We’re good.’”

Terri told her customers, “We’re in this together,” and she was completely sincere.

Service with a smile

She’s served on several boards of green industry associations and trade shows, volunteering her time for the Southeast Greenhouse Conference; the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA); OFA; and AmericanHort.

“I’ve been told my gift in the board room is to call out the elephant in the room that no one wants to discuss,” she says with a feisty chuckle.

Terri is not afraid to speak her mind, yet it’s done with compassion and kindness, says Linda Reindl, director of education at FNGLA.

“It’s refreshing to work with someone who doesn’t beat around the bush,” Linda adds.

She puts the industry first, ahead of her own business, says Ben Bolusky, CEO at FNGLA.

“She puts things through an industry filter before she puts it through the Bates filter,” he explains.

Linda recalls when Terri was on the AmericanHort board she made sure the states were well represented on a national level.

During her tenure with the Southeast Greenhouse Conference, Terri met

servicing the market

Bates Sons & Daughters operates a secondary business that offers pre-finished caladiums and sells half a million pots in the spring. Capital Caladiums serves customers who don't have the bench time to devote to growing caladiums.

"Our pre-finished caladiums cut our customers' production time in half," Terri explains.

The Bates family started Capital Caladiums to help move extra product, "but we're past that now. There's high demand for pre-finished caladiums and Capital Caladiums has its own customer base," she says.

Bobby Barnitz, vice president of Bob's Market and Greenhouses in Mason, West Virginia. Bobby is a mentor, customer and dear friend, Terri says.

"When I started getting involved in state, regional and national boards, Bobby took me under his wing," she explains. "He encouraged me to make a difference."

Bobby, who also served with Terri on the OFA board, says he's experienced highs and lows in the industry alongside Terri, and no matter the circumstance, she is a person of integrity.

"You can always count on Terri. For her, it's more about the relationships that are built than it is about the business," he says.

Terri served on the inaugural AmericanHort board of directors in 2014, and two years later she became the new national association's chairman of the board.

"She was instrumental in the combining of OFA and ANLA into the AmericanHort organization," he says.

Her service to the industry extends to

universities, including the University of Florida.

"Terri is very generous of her time and very willing to serve and support the industry," says Zhanao Deng, professor of environmental horticulture and ornamental plant breeder at UFL's Gulf Coast Research and Education Center. "She has served the industry locally, regionally and nationally in various capacities. These services take time and energy, and I really appreciate her willingness to do this and try her best for the industry."

Zhanao breeds caladiums at the research center, and he's been collaborating with Terri for nearly 20 years. Her skill at growing and her instincts for recognizing superb plants has amazed him for years.

"Some of our caladium varieties have pretty leaves but they produce tiny bulbs in our hands [at the research center]. When these varieties are transferred to her field, the plants become even prettier and produce large bulbs, which are important for producing eye-catching plants in



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TERRI BATES



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containers and in the landscape. I always admire her for this,” Zhanao says.

Terri gives some credit for growing quality caladiums to the locale.

“We grow on the shores on the shore of Lake Istokpoga, which has rich soil that’s very acidic,” she says.

Her knack for growing quality bulbs has made some of his caladium varieties commercially viable, and her eye for picking new caladiums is just as helpful, he adds.

“To produce new caladium varieties, we grow and screen tens of thousands of caladium plants from seeds and select the top hundreds for growers to evaluate. It’s hard to pick out of these new lines if their differences are subtle. When Terri comes to our caladium fields, she could pick out those unique or novel ones after a quick glance and, most importantly, those selected by her have a much greater success in commercial production,” Zhanao says.

Influences and inspiration

An active hurricane season is likely to influence some big changes in any industry. It forced Terri to evaluate part of her business model. When Irma made landfall in 2017, it wiped out some 30% of the farm’s crop for the 2018 season. And caladium growers produce only one crop each year. It’s a make-it-or-break-it scenario.

Instead of writing it off as a loss, she made a bold move and raised her prices to see what was left after the hurricane. It paid off.

“Prices in our market hadn’t budged for years and we were working very hard and having to turn away customers because we didn’t have enough product,” she says.



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“So, we took a risk and went up on price. And it went off without a hitch. There was no pushback and no arguments. It was clear our product was undervalued. We learned that if you don’t put value on your product, you’ll work yourself to death trying to sell it.

“For years, my generation had been all about competition and making sure we sell everything – just go, go, go. Now we’re stepping back and re-evaluating that. It’s a good shift. I think the younger generation has and will put value on what they produce and not have to work as hard and get a better profit margin.”

Terri’s had the good fortune of reaping inspiration from colleagues, especially from those who served on association boards alongside her.

“I know no one’s going to believe this, but I’ll be in situations where a lot of people are talking about business and I’ll keep my mouth shut and just listen,” she says. “I’ve been on different kinds of

boards with some amazing business owners like Tom Demaline, Dale Deppe and Susie Raker.”

Events such as hurricanes, family emergencies, recessions and pandemics have the propensity to cause chaos and major changes to the status quo. But Terri does not shy away from change, nor does it cause her consternation.

“I actually like change. Life is constantly changing – nothing stays the same. I plan as best I can, but there’s only so much you can do,” she says.

Terri says she never considered another career outside of horticulture, yet it’s the people of the industry that she treasures the most.

“I love my customers and colleagues, and I love seeing them at tradeshow,” she says. “I know their spouse’s name and their children’s name. I enjoy the plants, too, but you don’t get the caliber of people anywhere else as you do in this industry.” *
FIELD PHOTO COURTESY OF BATES SONS & DAUGHTERS



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FOR THE **BIGGER**
PICTURE

Lloyd Traven strives to empower the next generation and do business his way at Peace Tree Farms.

PHOTO CREDIT: © JEFF HENNECE/ALIF

BY CHRIS MANNING

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2021 HILA winner Ryan “RJ” Hop is a third generation descendant of the original founders of Walters Gardens.

Always improving,

big picture focused

Ryan “RJ” Hop has spent half a career refining processes and making market leader Walters Gardens into a refined, lean and mean greenhouse machine on Michigan’s Western Shore. **BY MATTHEW J. GRASSI**

They say all great leaders have a morning routine they stick to each day, and Walter's Gardens Ryan "RJ" Hop is no exception to that rule.

The chief operating officer and newly minted member of our 2021 HILA Class rises at 4:30 a.m. every morning and gets in a morning workout, getting his mind and body aligned and off to a good start before making the trek into the greenhouse for the day.

"I'll get a solid ride on my bike trainer in if it's dark or too cold that morning, maybe do some weightlifting and then I'll typically have a protein shake and get into office and I'll already be wide awake," Hop shares. "But really, it's the people that make me want to wake up and come into work every day. I couldn't ask for better people."

How it all started

Hop's grandfather Dennis Walters founded the Zeeland, Michigan-based wholesale greenhouse and nursery operation when then farm owner Dena Knoll hired the soon-to-be family patriarch as a farm hand. When Knoll's daughter Harriet and Walters eventually wed and decided to go into business together, the Walter's Gardens of today was officially born.



RYAN HOP



Hop is always reevaluating and looking for new, more efficient production methods at Walters Gardens.



“They took what was a smaller nursery business at the time and turned it into a big, successful business, so as a kid I got started in farming at the age of 10 just mowing lawns and doing weeding around the farm, and riding around with grandpa on his tractor and listening to him tell his stories about all the plants he loved,” Hop recalls.

High school and college (Hop double-majored in finance and marketing at nearby Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids from 2000-2004) meant coming back to the farm on breaks and over the summer to work.

The summer of his college graduation offered a bit of serendipity, as the operation’s one-man IT department at the time was making a career move. Having a good grasp of technology and with an intimate knowledge of basically every aspect of Walter’s operation from having spent so much time around the property growing up, Hop turned out to be the perfect fit as the new IT man.

Early returns

Fresh off a college campus and with a fresh set of eyes, Hop began implement-

ing changes within the operation’s IT department that were meant, in his words, to “help us get to where we’re working smarter, not harder.”

Hop realized early on the power of data aggregation and information sharing, and he did a bit of what people in professional football call self-scouting: the operation was creating and collecting and analyzing all of this great production and point-of-sale data, but it was all “siloe’d” as Hop recalls.

“We decided that we had to upgrade and out of that our Enterprise Reporting Program (ERP) called Live Product was born,” he says.

Hop says the proprietary software does everything from collecting data throughout all facets of the operation as well as managing everything from “inventory to order entry, to running supply and demand analysis and triggering alerts for our growers based on real-time conditions.”

“We have these handheld order scanners hooked up to it and our employees can walk with it and it will actually tell them the most efficient order when they’re picking and filling orders for shipping,” he adds.

Hop believes the program has been instrumental in allowing Walters to scale

up to its 500,000+ square feet of growing space under cover and over 1,500 acres of field production.

“Walters today really has two sides of the business – the greenhouse side and the bare root side, which is right around 45% of the business today with greenhouse making up the other 55%,” he says.

Covid coaster

Hop says the last 18 months at Walters amidst the pandemic has been “a roller coaster ride.” Before COVID broke out in the states, Hop and his team were expecting a great season. Then, throughout that March and April the company saw massive customer order cancellations, so everyone’s antennas were up.

“Then all of a sudden everything turned around, and our customers were begging to get their hands on anything we could grow for them,” he says. This season turned out really well, Hop says, as literally everything they planted this season has been sold already.

“I think what COVID has taught us so far is just how to be nimble and how to kind of be okay and cool-headed even when you’re not really sure what’s



going on, and how to press forward in the middle of that,” Hop says. “That first March and April we kind of held back on what we planted, and then once everything kind of switched and we realized everyone wanted plants we just said, ‘Let’s go for it!’”

As COO, Hop is a member of Charlie Hall’s EAGL program, which he said was a great help during the pandemic. “Everyone knows about Charlie, but I have to say that whole program was a great resource for us, it really was.”

Past winner speaks

Centerton Nursery’s Bridgeton, New Jersey Donald “Bob” Blew – a member of the 2020 HILA class – lavishes the most dude-appropriate form of praise possible when asked about his friend and colleague, Ryan Hop. He is the type of guy anyone would love to share a brew or two with.

“Most of our conversations about our companies and the industry are spent over a beer or two, after which we both would think that – with enough time – we could solve all of the industry’s problems,” the Centerton president says. “Even when we’re having fun and blowing off some

steam, he’s still thinking about things that could better himself or his company.”

Another facet of Hop that stands out for Blew is his generosity with his time and innate horticultural knowledge.

“Despite being at the forefront of a large and growing greenhouse operation, Ryan is always willing to take time out of his day to help me, whenever I need it,” he explains. “I often find myself seeking out an independent ear that I know I can trust to talk through issues or challenges, and he is always there with an objective opinion and a helping hand.”

Inefficiencies, according to Blew, are another non-starter for his horticulture industry buddy.

“For the last few years that I’ve known him, he has always wanted to find ways to improve his company,” he says. “I’d say that he hates seeing inefficiencies. He can’t stand seeing something being done in a way that he knows could be done better.”

But perhaps the grandest compliment Blew can dole out is to recognize Hop’s near-wizardly mastery of his domain and his role at Walters, and within the greenhouse industry itself.

“Ryan has the ability to see things from both the 90,000-foot view (as Charlie Hall would put it) down to the smallest detail – meaning, he can still see the big picture, but he also realizes how big picture decisions effect individual employees, departments, or even SKUs,” he says.

“This industry has a lot of broad-stroke, big-picture types of managers. And we

have a lot of micro-managers that focus too closely on one thing or one sector of their business. Ryan has the entire process in mind, and he can make decisions that move his company forward in a prudent and profitable direction.”

Tech focused

Having spent the bulk of his career working in both technology (Hop was Walters IT director prior to being named COO) and horticulture, Hop wishes there was a bit more give and take between the two worlds. It is improving of late, but still, horticulture in general has a way to go in that regard.

“For me, the hardest thing for this industry to change is just watching all of these great pieces of technology that are being developed for, and how instrumental they are in, this industry, and that general reluctance for a lot of growers to adopt,” he says. “Plant people don’t really seem to be technology people – and I’m okay with that – but there needs to be a little more crossover in my opinion.”

Hop has been influential in how Walters Gardens approaches the horticulture technology sector. The current ethos is to “start small, you’ve got to walk before you can run,” according to Hop. This fall Walters will be running with a new TTA Flex Sorter, and the young COO is eager to get the machine into the greenhouse and put it to work making his employees’ lives easier.

Charlie Hall’s EAGL program helped Hop and Co. decide to go all-in on production during the pandemic slowdown – a move that paid big dividends at Walters Gardens.



RYAN HOP

“Our big thing there is, technology doesn’t solve all of our problems by itself,” he says. “It’s the people working with these machines and technologies that are really helping us solve problems. Technology is just an aid.”

The Flex Sorter will enable a slightly smaller staffed second shift once they iron out all the kinks and get it up and running. Hop says the plan is to “elongate the working day but at the same time not overwhelm anyone with more hours or work.”

“I see technology as the helper but again, it’s not necessarily the one thing that solves the problem, in fact we find that very rarely is it just a single technology solving a problem by itself,” he adds. “It still takes the right person in that operator’s chair, solving the real issues.”

Community oriented

As if the pandemic didn’t cause enough misfortune of its own accord, it also has put a pause on one of Hops’ favorite annual traditions at Walters: the spring charity sale.

“In a typical year we would open up to the public with our excess inventory right around Memorial Day weekend or shortly after, and then donate all of the proceeds from the sale that year to a local charity,” Hop says. “The community has really embraced it for years, and we got it to the point where we were giving really large amounts to charity.”

Unfortunately, a multitude of reasons and circumstances related to COVID (it honestly was just unsafe for people to come to it, Hop allows) have halted the sale for the last two years. Hop and his management team remain committed to the local community, however.

“Just this morning we were sitting around the conference room table and talking about it, we like to give back at least 10% each year, and give it in support of some of these really great organizations locally that are doing a lot of good in the community,” Hop says.

Ryan the guy

Away from the greenhouse, Hop enjoys spending time with his growing family –



If you’re vacationing around Western Michigan this summer, keep an eye out for Ryan and his young family on summer holiday.

he and his wife have two young children – as well as spending some time kicking around Western Michigan’s many world-class golf courses.

“I’d say my favorite thing to do outside of work and outside of being at home with my family is to play golf,” Hop says. “I’ve been in the same Thursday night golf league for the past 20 years now, with the same group of guys, a lot of them I’ve been playing with since I was in high school.”

With restrictions eased and travel mostly given the OK for this summer, and Walters’ busy spring and early summer season having come to an end in late June, Hop and his family will be heading out for new adventures this summer up in the Mitten State.

“We are just starting out life as campers,” Hop chuckles. “We just bought a nice camper and all the gear, so the plan is to hit the road and experience a bunch of Michigan’s state parks and stay at some nice campgrounds.”

Future thoughts

For all his redeeming qualities – and there seem to be quite a few, probably too many, to list here – Hop remains grounded in his work and his daily mission to produce

quality plants in the most efficient manner possible.

“While so many nurseries and greenhouses are focused on growth, especially in the current market, Ryan sits back and asks the really important questions, like does it even make sense to grow now, or in this certain way?” Blew shares. “If we do this, can we maintain profitability? Can we staff it in the way we need to? Those sorts of questions. Without a grounded connection to reality, it can be easy for companies to lack this focus.”

Moving forward, it’s sunny skies and bright days ahead for this mid-career horticulture professional and his growing family – both at home and at Walters.

“I really do think the future is bright,” Hop practically beams. “The pandemic oddly brought in this new gardener set, and these new gardeners are excited about their homes and plants, and I don’t see that excitement waning as we open back up.

“In a way, we were struggling with this Millennial generation [pre-COVID], and then somehow, somehow, COVID kept everyone home and it opened up horticulture to a whole new type of client and group of people. It’s exciting, that’s for sure.” ✨



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JAKE PIERSON

finding **the next level**

BY MATT MCCLELLAN



Jake Pierson is steering Pierson Nurseries into the future.

Jake Pierson is a second-generation nurseryman. His father, Dale Pierson founded Pierson Nurseries in Biddeford, Maine, with his wife, Mike, in 1973. Jake technically joined his parents' business in 2004, after a few years of college and a ton of student debt forced him to re-evaluate his situation.

Of course, like with most family businesses, he'd been working in or around the nursery since he was a kid.

"I practiced my multiplication on a potting trailer by counting how many rows of plants there were and how many plants were in the row to figure out how many we'd potted," Jake says.

However, Jake's story is not one of those in which the second-generation son was a lock to take over the family business ever since he could walk the rows of containers.

A man with a beard and a red t-shirt is kneeling in a nursery. He is surrounded by numerous purple, spherical flowers in black pots. In the background, there are large, arched structures covered with a dark mesh, likely greenhouses or shade houses. The sky is overcast.

Jake Pierson started from the bottom at the nursery his father founded. Now his vision leads the Maine nursery into the future.

JAKE PIERSON

The native plant segment has seen steady growth for Pierson Nurseries due to community restoration and mitigation projects.



“When he was younger he worked a bit there and didn’t enjoy it at all,” Dale says.

For a while, Jake didn’t think he was going into the family business. A voracious reader who typically has two or three books going at any given time, he studied political science in college before leaving without a degree.

“It was an eye-opening experience,” he says. “I had always been at the top of my class in school. And when I went to college, it didn’t click with me. It just

wasn’t what I expected. I really was disappointed that I was paying a lot of money to be taught the same way I was taught in elementary school, middle school and high school.”

Leaving college the way he did brought Jake to a few realizations. Just because a path worked for other people, even people you know and trust, doesn’t mean that you have to follow that same path. Different people experience things differently, and that’s OK. The lessons applies to leader-

ship, as well. Your vision isn’t always correct and your way isn’t always the right way.

“To be cognizant of that, I pay attention to know that not everybody sees everything the way you see it,” Jake says. “And that’s really going to help us as a company. It’s helped me as an owner, as a boss and as a partner with my dad, understanding that conversation and discussion has to happen for anything to move forward in a positive way.”



tives to care about the same things growers care about.

He's stepped up to take leadership positions in state, regional and national associations. As vice president and then president of the Maine Landscape and Nursery Association (MELNA), Jake launched and grew his state's Plant Something! Program into one of the most successful in the U.S., according to Donald F. Sproul, executive director of MELNA.

Plant Something! is the brainchild of Cheryl Goar of the Arizona Nursery Association. It's a national marketing campaign aimed at convincing consumers to buy plants. It's a simple program that is adaptable to anyone in the green industry. Other attempted national marketing programs have failed because they tried to be too specialized, overshooting their consumers' horticulture education level.

"They don't know, they don't care whether it's a hydrangea, magnolia, juniper or potentilla," Jake says. "They just see it as plants."

It irks him to see so many companies in other industries touting their environmental initiatives. To Jake, that seems like a missed opportunity for horticulture and the industry needs to do better.

"We're the original green industry. When you think about it, we're growing oxygen-making machines," he says.

He's also been a driving force behind the Maine Flower Show, which became an instant hit with the gardening public, homeowners, and professionals when it was launched in 2017. It wasn't his first rodeo in show management, as a past president of New England Grows, the regional trade show and education event that folded in 2018 after 25 years.

With MELNA, he's also handled annual charity work landscaping projects. One recent project was the landscape of the Travis Mills Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by retired U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Travis Mills to support recalibration and wellness goals of the families of veterans injured in active duty. Jake worked on the implementation of a world-class landscape for the foundation, which serves as a vacation destination for these families.

Now 38, Jake is a co-owner of Pierson Nurseries, Inc., a wholesale grower and re-wholesaler of trees, shrubs, and perennials that primarily serves clients in the furthest reaches of Maine and New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and beyond.

Industry advocate

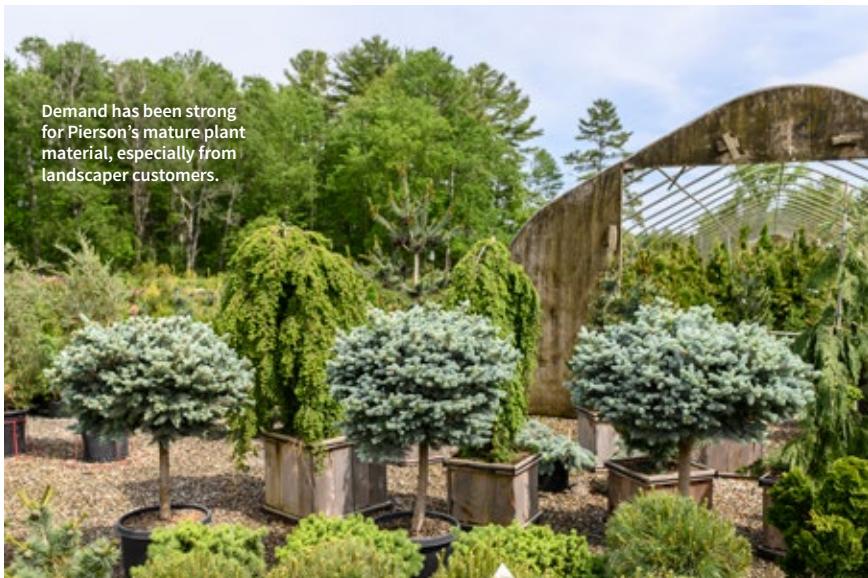
After leaving college, he came home with a different perspective. He had always gotten along with the nursery industry folks he'd met, and he liked their outlook a lot

more than some of the individuals he met in the collegiate political arena.

"We're farmers in the big picture, and farmers are a different breed," he says. "We have to be a little independent and we have to roll with the punches a little bit more than other industries."

He's used his background in political science to become an advocate for his people, from navigating tricky legislative issues to understanding how the system works and how to get elected representa-

JAKE PIERSON



Demand has been strong for Pierson's mature plant material, especially from landscaper customers.

“Through Jake’s leadership, and the efforts of numerous volunteers, the project was a resounding success,” Sproul says.

Getting started

Peter van Berkum remembers Jake as a teenager working at New England Grows as a show official, zipping around the show floor on an electric golf cart and helping anyone with anything. Peter became a mentor to Jake, even though their personalities are quite different.

“I always joke that I’m a loud-mouth Mainer and he’s a quiet Dutchman, and we have very different styles, but we always have really interesting and educational conversations,” Jake says. “Every time we talk, both of us come away with something different that we will want to try in our businesses.”

Van Berkum agrees with Jake’s assessment and enjoys their frank and honest chats.

“We’re totally different people, which makes it fun,” van Berkum says. “You know just where you stand with Jake, he’s not going to sugarcoat it. I always appreciate that.”

Unlike other industries, the nursery business is not ruthless. Even your competitors are often willing to share their thoughts, successes and difficulties.

“You’d never get a Microsoft and an

Apple executive in the same room talking about the trouble they’re having with their operating systems,” Jake says. “But I could call my biggest competitor in New England about a certain plant that we’re having trouble growing, and they’ll tell me that they do too. And they’ll give me tips about how to do a better job on it. That gives me a lot of inspiration because there are other people struggling with the same issues you’re having.”

Because of the willingness to share, Jake says the advice he would give to anyone starting out in the industry is to join your local associations and organizations. When his father was just getting started, he joined NENA, the now-defunct New England Nursery Association. Dale attended a meeting and ended up sitting next to Neil Van Sloun, the founder of Sylvan Nursery in Massachusetts. Both men politely introduced themselves and began chatting. The elder Pierson left with a notebook full of ideas to jumpstart his fledgling business.

“My dad always jokes that ‘that one day has paid for my entire life of any trade association membership fee that I will ever pay. And probably any fee that you’ll pay, Jake,’ he says. “And it was all because of one meeting where he sat down next to somebody who ran a business like we wanted to be like.”



As Jake became more involved with the nursery, he’d answer the phone and Dale’s business contacts would think Jake was his father. They’d often comment to Dale upon meeting Jake for the first time that his son was so like him that they couldn’t tell the two men apart. Dale would thank them with a smile, wait a beat and drop the hammer: telling them he and his wife adopted Jake when he was 3 days old. He loves watching the surprised reactions.

For his part, Dale was aware of the pressures that come with being the scion of the business owner. Dale never had expectations of Jake or his sister joining the family business. As a compulsive planner, Dale started to devise exit strategies when



Jake Pierson served six consecutive years on the MELNA Executive Committee, two as president and three as vice president.

he was 50, picking the best of the few options available to him at the time. That all changed when Jake decided he wanted to be involved.

“He started at the bottom, and did everything,” Dale says. “My nursery manager gave him the title ‘manager in training.’ I used to ask him once in a while, ‘you still in it for the long haul?’ He is. I’ve stepped back away and let him run more of it by far than I do.”

The partnership has been working well. Dale still provides his son with the occasional bit of tempering advice.

“In general, we do a good job together,” he says. “I can count on one hand the number of times we’ve been mad at each

other for more than an hour. That’s not bad for the last 15-or-so years.”

Finding the next level

One tip Jake says has helped him along the way is to be prepared for failure. No matter what you do and in spite of your careful actions, plants will die. And it’s not necessarily because anyone did anything wrong. Growers need to make peace with that fact.

“We’re dealing with living things,” he says. “We’re not dealing with a 2x4, a computer chip or a piece of plywood. We’re dealing with living organisms that no matter your best intention, may not survive. But every time it’s an opportunity

to learn and you’ll get better at it.”

The toughest challenge Pierson Nursery faces now is labor. The nursery pays competitively and has ramped up its use of the H-2A program. Still, there are times in which workers are left short-staffed. Each morning, Jake leads a “big picture” meeting that discusses the happenings at the nursery that day. Jake says if his team has a sense of why some employees are being shifted to another part of the nursery, they won’t be resentful about being left to handle their task with less help than usual.

Help was on the way, however, from Jamaica. Most of Pierson’s full-time staff works from February to December with a few high-school kids for summer help.

JAKE PIERSON

This year, the Piersons brought in six H-2A workers who'll stay from March to November. The nursery industry's labor force is Latino-heavy, but New England apple growers have traditionally used Jamaican labor. Finding an employee who speaks Spanish is difficult in Maine, and with Jamaica, the language barrier is a non-issue. Jake spoke with several area growers, who recommended the program, and he's glad he took the leap. The extra hands help when "the wheels come off" in spring.

"I'm really, really proud of how well we've integrated the folks from Jamaica into our team and our family," Jake says.

Jake also worked with FlowVision to improve efficiency through their Lean manufacturing principles. Jake says Gary Cortes' firm was an incredible asset that helped the nursery streamline its potting system. He's got plans for future improvements to their pulling, loading and shipping departments, as well.

He's also changed the irrigation system so that all of Pierson's field-grown material is under drip irrigation. This keeps labor costs down, through not moving pipe around, and is better for the soil health, reducing the chance that they will compact the soil by excessive overhead irrigation.

"We're being much more targeted with what we're watering," Jake says. "We can just water the rows of plants, not the weeds."

Jake has pushed for growth and the nursery has substantially grown since he joined. The staffing level has doubled, sales have significantly increased and production has had to grow to keep pace. Being in Maine, the nursery is physically the farthest point from West Coast suppliers. Jake wanted to increase the amount of their own grown material to give them more control over their inventory. Last year, the nursery bought its third parcel of land, about 120 acres which will be in production within the next two years. Before that acquisition, Pierson had 50 acres of field, 10 acres of B&B holding area, 6 acres for wetland production and 12 acres of containers.

What the future holds

The business is set up for success, which is one of the reasons Jake decided to stay. Located in Southern Maine and witnessing the push of people moving northeast from Massachusetts, the nursery is well-positioned for growth. Pierson's Nursery sells to landscape contractors, who have stayed busy in the Northeast for a long time. There have been downturns, but they've come back strong after each setback. Pierson's product can't be outsourced; it's heavy, in-demand material that is not readily available just anywhere. The region's public is demanding more and more. And it's capital-intensive to set up shop, which means it's less likely that a large competitor will move in.

Peter van Berkum says three qualities have helped Jake succeed: curiosity, drive, and the willingness to make changes.

"Being 2nd generation isn't nearly as easy as people think, from what I've seen," says Peter van Berkum. "It takes a real special kind of mind and determination like Jake has to take something your father's done and make it go, because your old man's been doing it for 30 years. He really took that ball and ran with it."



Pierson Nurseries offers the tried-and-true options New England landscapers want, plus native plants and new products like Instant Hedge.

He also thinks Jake's wife, Allie, has been a great asset to the company due to her cool and collected nature.

Jake and Allie have two children, Kay and Theodore, who are eight and seven-years-old. Jake loves being a dad, and says that just like the nursery industry, parenthood provides something new every day. His family loves boating and spends a lot of time on the water. Jake also enjoys golf, even though he isn't very good at it, and he's hoping to rekindle his love of skiing as his kids get older.

"I don't have any doubt that that nursery is going to do fine over the next 25 years," van Berkum says. "He's one of the few people in Maine that really does a lot of growing and rewholesaling and has a good formula going on. He has a great breadth of knowledge about herbaceous and woody material and in the general running of the nursery. He's got a great vision of what he needs to do and how to get there."

Dale and Jake have been executing their succession plan for the nursery, which becomes more weighted on Jake's side each year. Currently, Dale is working two days a week (plus-or-minus a day here and there) for the next 2-5 years. After that, he'll be officially done. And he believes he's leaving the nursery in the best of hands.

"He does an excellent job and he's taken our business to the next level, which I wouldn't have done," Dale says. "As I've aged, I've become a little more risk-averse. (The nursery is) certainly larger than it's ever been. All excellent moves." *

NOMINATE AN OUTSTANDING LEADER

FOR THE HILA CLASS OF 2022

The 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.

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- Nominee name
- Nominee email
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- In your own words, please explain in detail why you think this person deserves to win a HILA.

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Lucas Greenhouses
Monroeville, New Jersey

ALAN JONES

Manor View Farm
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TERRI MCENANEY

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ART VAN WINGERDEN

Metrolina Greenhouses
Huntersville, North Carolina

2021 WINNERS

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Ostrander, Ohio

STEVE CASTORANI

North Creek Nurseries
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DONALD BLEW

Centerton Nursery
Bridgeton, New Jersey

LYNDSI OESTMANN

Loma Vista Nursery
Ottawa, Kansas

BILL ZALAKAR

Kurt Weiss Greenhouses
Center Moriches, New York

FRANK COLLIER

Pleasant Cove Nursery
Rock Island, Tennessee

MATTHEW J. PISCITELLI

Matthew Piscitelli's entrepreneurial spirit led him to Olson's Greenhouses, where he revived a century-old family business to new levels.

BY BROOKE BILYJ

growing
(B O S T O N)

ALL PHOTOS: NICOLE CHAN



STRONG

Matthew Piscitelli's initial flash of entrepreneurship happened on the school bus on his way to grade school.

"The first thing I ever did in business was buy one-cent bubblegum and sell it for a nickel," says Matt, who grew up in Brockton, Mass., about 30 minutes south of Boston.

"That was the first sense I ever had that I wanted to be my own boss, and I've never really had a boss since then."

Although Matt's business aspirations were unmistakable, he didn't feel a strong pull toward any certain industry as he progressed through school. The thought of working in the horticulture industry never



crossed his mind—but now, as co-owner of Olson’s Greenhouse, with an award-winning flower documentary to his name, Matt can’t imagine working in another field.

“Even in college, I had no idea what I wanted to do,” says Matt, who earned a Bachelor of Science in marketing from Bryant University in Rhode Island, where he was highly involved in student senate and fraternity leadership. He cemented his business acumen at Northeastern University, where he taught introduction to business classes as a teaching assistant while pursuing his MBA in finance. “I wanted to own my own company. I just didn’t know what it was going to be yet.”

By following his entrepreneurial spirit from one successful business to another, Matt forged a career path that finally led him to horticulture—where he’s making a big impact through flowers and film festivals, alike.

From startup to success

After completing grad school in 2001, Matt found his first business opportunity right inside his home.

“I had a friend who was storing some home respiratory equipment in my house, and I had all kinds of questions,” he says. “Once he explained what it was, and what the reimbursement rates were from the

federal government and private insurers, a little bell rang over my head. That’s how Orion Home Health was born.”

Matt partnered with his friend to found the company after writing a business plan based on his financial projections. They launched early the following year and began selling home respiratory equipment. The operation taught him a lot about running a business—and even more about working effectively with a business partner.

“My strengths are finance and accounting,” Matt says. “I had no idea about healthcare, so I needed a business partner who understood the industry, the product,



Olson's Greenhouses Inc. was a challenging business opportunity for Matt Piscitelli because he didn't know the horticulture industry.



Matt Piscitelli considers himself a serial entrepreneur.

and the trends. Our strengths didn't overlap completely, but they touched like cogs in an engine, and that was important."

The pair worked well together with this complementary approach—growing the business past the million-dollar milestone within three years. Their quick success caught the attention of Rotech Healthcare, a public company that acquired their startup in 2005.

Following the successful sale of his first business, Matt took an extended four-month vacation with his newlywed wife, Stephanie. They traveled to the Greek island of Mykonos, then spent several weeks in Naples, Florida, along with several trips

to Cape Cod, Vermont, and other spots around New England.

Then, the entrepreneurial itch returned. "I need to get back into business," Matt told his wife. "I have to either start something or buy something."

Joining Olson's family

Matt began writing business plans to develop his next startup, leaning toward an opportunity in computer hardware sales. But it was a routine trip to the local garden center that planted the seed for his next business venture.

Matt and Stephanie had been shopping together at Olson's Garden Center in Wareham for years, gradually developing a friendship with the owner, Clive Olson, Jr. Around this time, as Matt was exploring his next career move, Clive mentioned that his father wanted to sell the family's wholesale flower business, Olson's Greenhouses Inc. Following the sudden losses of two top employees, along with a devastating fire that destroyed about 40,000 square feet of greenhouses—all within the span of just a few months—the business patriarch was, at age 75, ready to retire.

"Thinking I knew everything, I said, 'Let me help you put together a prospectus and market [the business for sale]," Matt says. "Once I did the prospectus, I understood why Clive Olson, Sr., wanted to get out of the business. But it had a premium

product with a great name attached to it. There were real opportunities to capitalize on it."

Even with Matt's help, the Olson family couldn't find any interested buyers for the greenhouse, which Clive Sr.'s father established in 1916. Yet Matt saw potential in the antiquated facilities, so he took matters into his own hands and asked Clive Jr., to buy the business with him. "I said, 'Listen, there's value here, but I can't do it alone. I don't know the product. I don't know the industry. I need to work with somebody,'" Matt remembers.

After seeing Matt grow his first business so successfully, Clive Jr. couldn't refuse his friend's offer. "I would typically never have a business partner, but I saw him work with his previous partner to build and sell their company within a few years, and they got along great," Clive says. "[Because of] our friendship, I knew we were going to do great, too."

Matt and Clive purchased Olson's Greenhouses in April 2006—taking the (then) 90-year-old business into the third-generation of family leadership while introducing the company's first non-Olson owner in history. By combining Clive's industry knowledge with Matt's business acumen, the two young co-owners brought the perfect balance to revitalize the operation.

“The quality of Olson’s product was second-to-none, but we saw inefficiencies in management, production, and shipping. It was just a matter of streamlining [the process],” Matt says. “They had to get out of their own way, because they were mired in nearly 100 years of doing things the same way. So, we had to come in and shake things up. The business wasn’t going to be around if drastic changes weren’t made.”

Revitalizing a century-old operation

Matt and Clive shared a vision of growing Olson’s Greenhouse to carry on the family’s legacy under a new era of efficiency.

“We had to make sacrifices, for sure,” Matt says. “For the first two years, we [basically] took no salary—\$50 a week; it might have been \$100 in year two, but that was our investment. When two owners don’t take a salary, that’s a big chunk of money going straight back into the business. That [reinvestment] repaired the greenhouses, rebuilt the loading dock, bought new trucks and shipping carts, and fixed a lot of broken things that made production more efficient.”

The new leadership duo began implementing automation to modernize the aging business, which turned 100 in 2016. Automated pot filling machines and conveyor belts sped up production, while boom irrigation replaced hand-watering to reduce labor needs and improve consistency. These changes allowed the operation to scale smoothly as they expanded the business—adding more growing capacity while diversifying their retail avenues.

In 2009, they decided to open a garden center in one of the greenhouses, mainly selling product grown on-site. Naming the store was one of the easiest business

decisions Matt ever made. “Clive Olson Sr.’s favorite term is ‘lovely day.’ That’s what he’ll say when you leave the room,” he says. “So, we decided to take the first greenhouse, which is right along a busy street, and turn it into Lovely Day Garden Center. It’s a little jewel.”

The on-site store serves customers with “middle-of-the-road pricing,” Matt says, whereas Olson’s Garden Center (which is fully owned by Clive Jr.) offers a high-end retail experience, complete with statues, fountains, bushes, trees, and shrubs. In 2010, Matt and Clive partnered up again to open a coffee shop called Cup 2 Café adjacent to Olson’s Garden Center.

Then, in 2012, another retail opportunity walked right into the greenhouse. “We had one of our largest customers come in and say, ‘I’m done. You guys want to buy the business?’” Matt says. “As a business guy, my ears perked up, and we worked out a deal.” They purchased Klein Greenhouse, about 20 miles away, to complete their retail portfolio with a “high volume, low margin angle.”

“We saw the value in having another retail location that we could expand on,” Matt says. “It creates a larger customer base for Olson’s Greenhouses when we control the product from the seed to the consumer, and there’s a [better] margin versus just selling it [wholesale].”

Documenting daffodils

As a diehard Bostonian, Matt always looks forward to Patriot’s Day, on the third Monday of April every year, when the city hosts the world’s oldest annual marathon. “I go every year,” he says. “It’s my favorite day in Boston.”

The annual marathon festivities have become personal traditions for Matt, who has lived within an hour of Boston his whole life. Whether it’s raining, snowing, or beautiful that day, he’s there. In fact, he was standing at the finish line in 2013 when the bombs exploded — killing three people and injuring hundreds more.

“I was 70 feet away when the bombing happened. Another three minutes, and I would have been dead,” he says. “It was a scary day, and it had a big impact [on a lot of people.]”

The tragedy unified the city around a slogan of emerging “Boston Strong.” As a tribute to this movement, a local horticulturalist named Diane Valle began organizing community support to place tens of thousands of potted daffodils along the route, as a way of welcoming runners back to symbolize a new beginning. Matt loved the idea—given his personal ties to the event and his professional connection to the flower industry. He joined the board of directors for Marathon Daffodils, the 501(c)3 non-profit, as Olson’s Greenhouses supplied the flower bulbs to support Diane’s vision.

When Matt walked past the daffodil-lined marathon route on his way into Boston’s Capital Grille in 2015, he realized just how much time and care had gone into those flowers. “I said, ‘If anybody knew what it took to get one of these daffodils here, they’d be impressed.’” That’s when the idea struck him: to produce a documentary that followed a single flower’s journey to become a symbol of hope at the Boston Marathon.

Matt excused himself from the restaurant and stepped outside to call his brother, Michael Piscitelli, who has produced shows like “Wicked Tuna” for National Geographic and “American Chopper” on Discovery. After Matt explained his idea for “Path of the Daff,” Michael jumped on board as director, cinematographer, editor, and executive producer. Clive Jr. joined up, as well, sharing an executive producer title with Matt as they self-funded the project together.

The three of them spent the next two years filming every moment of the flower’s lifecycle, from bulb to the Boston Marathon, telling the story through multiple perspectives along the way. Matt traveled to Holland twice to document the daffodils’ origins with the help of his suppliers, Pete Rotteveel and Ben Van Egmond of Rotteveel Bulb Co.

After a year of post-production work, the “Path of the Daff” entered the film festival circuit in 2019. Eleven festivals screened the film, which racked up a handful of awards including best documentary, best cinematography, and best director. To top it off, the movie recently



With wholesale and retail operations, Olson’s Greenhouse controls its supply chain.



L-R: Clive Olson, Jr., Clive Olson, Sr., Matt Piscitelli. Matt is the first non-Olson owner in the company's 100-year-plus history.

nabbed three Emmy nominations for best lead editor, best audio mix, and best score.

In Clive's opinion, the award-winning film officially marks Matt's evolution from "a business guy" to a horticultural leader who's bringing a fresh perspective to flowers. Considering that Matt didn't understand that a "six-inch" geranium referred to the pot size—not the plant height—when he first joined Olson's, Clive is impressed with the impact Matt's making, not just in Boston, but across the profession. "To have this movie is pretty cool for the whole industry," Clive says.

Building a business legacy

Piscitelli stays actively involved in all his business ventures—spending time at Klein and Olson's Greenhouses every day, and frequently visiting the coffee shop in Wareham.

"Being at the morning and afternoon meeting daily shows that I'm an involved owner, and that's exceptionally important," says Matt, who lives just 10 minutes down the road from the greenhouse.

Although Matt strives to remain visible as a leader, he also believes in building strong layers of management that run smoothly without constant oversight. "I have great managers, so that creates an opportunity for me to have time off," says Matt, noting that several of his managers have decades of experience at the company. "When I have time off, it's straight to the family. That's the only place I'd rather be besides work."

Matt and Stephanie have been married 15 years. Their sons—Grayson, 14, a freshman; and Madden, 11, a fifth-grader—both play sports, which means, "a lot of games, a lot of practices, a lot of fun," Matt says. The family also spends a lot of time together at their vacation home.

The horticulture industry gives Matt a chance to stay involved in his kids' schools—whether he's showing off bugs to teach students about Olson's pest management program or handing out seed starter kits through the Massachusetts Flower Growers' Association, where he serves as vice president. Matt also works with local agricultural schools to recruit greenhouse

employees, and continues to mentor business students at Bryant.

"I wouldn't be as good at business without being in horticulture," Matt says. "I've learned a lot here, and I have no intention of leaving the green industry."

Matt has plenty of leadership advice to share with the next generation, based on the tremendous growth and turnaround he has orchestrated at Olson's in just 15 years. In that time, the operation has expanded from 17 acres of outdoor production to now 65, with six acres under cover.

As gratifying as the business growth has been, Matt says the greatest honor is earning the respect of Olson's team—especially his predecessor, Clive Sr., who has become a father figure to him since losing his own dad many years ago.

"The thing I'm most proud about is that Olson's is still up and running. The greenhouse needed a lot to just survive, to be where it is today," Matt says. "Mr. Olson has watched the business that he stepped back from flourish, and if I can have even a one-person legacy like that, that would make me happy." ✨



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