

# Head down, MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Bobby Barnitz embodies the humble, get-it-done-at-all-costs mindset that remains undefeated in the greenhouse.

BY MATTHEW J. GRASSI

**I**n describing Bobby Barnitz's leadership style, perhaps his own son, Alan, says it best: "He's just one of those types of guys — you put your head down and you get the job done, every day, no matter what. And, hey, have some fun while you're at it, too."

Bobby heads up Bob's Market and Greenhouses' young plant propagation department, where he's spent the last 26 years building it up (basically from scratch) to today's standing as a Gold Service Supplier with Ball Seed Co. Bobby and his team propagate and ship out 4,500 to 5,000 SKUs throughout the spring and summer production season, so he also helps manage Bob's fleet of 14 trucks.

"Being the oldest, I've done a little bit of everything [at Bob's], with the exception of growing," Bobby says. "I was not the one you could get to go out and get on the end of a water hose. I enjoyed the people side of our business more, so sales, customer service, those have kind of been my strong suit."

## How it started

Much of Bobby's leadership style is derived from the very people who started Bob's Greenhouses, his father Robert and mother Corena. Unfortunately, Corena passed away last spring, while Robert is still active at the ripe old age of 90. Robert was even recently honored with a mayoral proclamation naming May 10, 2022 (his 90th birthday), "Bob Barnitz Day" in Mason, West Virginia.

"My father's motto was always 'Pay attention to the details, no matter how small,' and that's still our company motto today," Bobby says.

Work ethic also was passed down from his dad, who Bobby says maintained a full-time job at a local chemical lab for the first six years as he and Corena worked tirelessly to get Bob's Market and Greenhouses off the ground.

"Getting out of high school at the time, I knew I wanted to get into the family business, so I went to business college at night and worked at the greenhouse in the daytime," Bobby recalls.

## Bob's Market and Greenhouses at a glance

**FOUNDERS:**  
Robert and  
Corena Barnitz

**FOUNDED:**  
1970

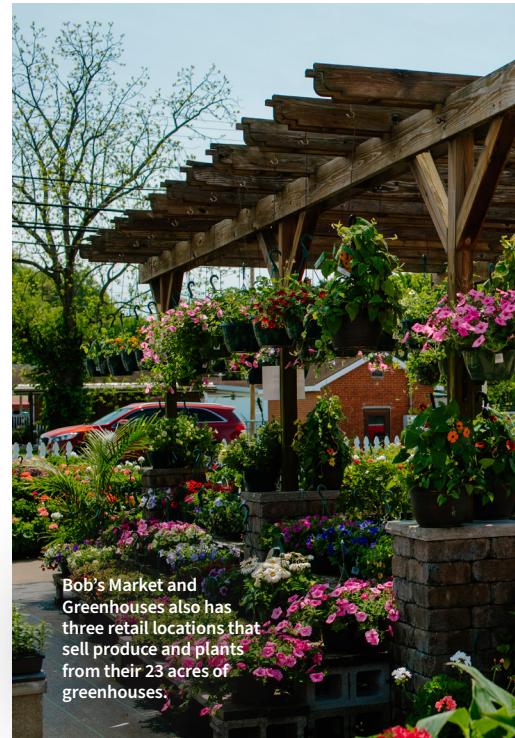
**LOCATIONS:**  
Mason, West  
Virginia  
(headquarters);  
Gallipolis, Ohio;  
Belpre, Ohio;  
Parkersburg,  
West Virginia;  
Pittsburgh,  
Pennsylvania;  
Atlanta, Georgia

**PRODUCTS:**  
Ball Seed rooted  
plugs, flowering  
bedding plants,  
finished plants

Bobby Barnitz is the  
second-generation leader  
of Bob's Market and  
Greenhouses.



Bob's has three wholesale production facilities in Mason, West Virginia; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Atlanta, Georgia.



Bob's Market and Greenhouses also has three retail locations that sell produce and plants from their 23 acres of greenhouses.

In the early days, according to Bobby, Bob's was a drastically different business than it is today.

"Back then, the retail store was the main market and we did a lot of produce wholesaling," he says. "We bought from all these small farms and growers down in the Carolinas and shipped them up here to sell to retailers all over West Virginia. It was really difficult; you'd work the long, difficult spring flower season and then spend the rest of the summer on the road in a truck hauling produce."

Those Tobacco Road connections got Bob's into the bedding plant business in the '80s, which evolved into growing fall pansies and finished potted plants for retail by the end of the decade. Having that second production season helped them later add fall pansies to the mix, and in 1996, they kicked off plug production in Mason.

"To me, that diversity is the biggest benefit that we have. We're not tied to one mono-crop or one season," Bobby says.

### Trucks matter

Another big benefit Bob's is currently enjoying is having its own 14-truck fleet for plant shipping. Bobby manages the logistics and the drivers who shuttle Bob's plants between Mason and all points thereafter.

"Providing that personal service to the customer and having the truck driver employees who understand that when they are out on the road and delivering to our customers, they are the face of our business — that has become one of my biggest passions," Bobby says. "In busi-

ness, you're only as good as what you last accomplished, so you have to make sure you do it right every single time."

Peak plug shipping time hits in early April, then Bob's retail side of the business will usually start opening up, getting more and more busy, depending on the spring weather, of course.

"We have a lot of wholesale customers to the south of us, so having that earlier season allows us to ship out a crop of bedding plants and hanging baskets (early) and open up more greenhouse space," Bobby says. "That allows us to use that greenhouse space two-three-four times during spring or early summer season."

Truck drivers at Bob's are kept on full-time employee status, so when shipping season slows a bit, Bobby can put his logistics cap on and deploy the labor precisely where the operation needs it the most.

"Maybe those drivers have a little downtime and now we're hauling our own plastic supplies [back to the greenhouse], or if we don't have enough trucking volume for all the drivers, we can use some of them in the greenhouse," he explains.

Bobby estimates that at the peak of spring plug shipping season, the operation is sending out 20,000 tray shipments to 20 different states around the East Coast and Mid-Atlantic region.

"When you keep that same driver on that same route, season after season, they develop that relationship with our customers. They become the face of Bob's Green-



houses,” he says.

Another benefit to maintaining its own trucking division is the operational flexibility it provides. “What if your best customer called you at one o’clock in the afternoon and says they’re having a bang-up day sales-wise and really need another truckload of plant material by tomorrow morning?” he asks. “Without those trucks and those full-time drivers, we couldn’t make that happen for that customer.”

### Family matters

Bobby and his wife Sue — who also works at the greenhouse — have been married for 43 years. They first laid eyes on one another across the greenhouses in Mason, Sue having just been hired by Bobby’s parents.

Today, Bobby and Sue have two sons. The oldest is a doctoral cancer researcher up in Boston with his wife and three young children. Alan also has three little ones, works at Bob’s and lives close by. The six grandkids range from ages 2.5 to 16, and are a huge part of Bobby and Sue’s world.

“He’s very much your classic family man,” Alan says. “He always wants to hang with the grandkids, and he and mom are getting away to Boston to see my brother and his kids when they can make it happen.”

Growing up, Alan played high school basketball and



After finishing high school, Bobby attended business college at night and worked in the family’s greenhouses during the day.

golf for the local school district. Even with all of his responsibilities at the greenhouse, Alan says Bobby was always “one of those dads who never missed a ball game.”

“I played high school golf in the spring, and if you know that sport, it’s not exactly a popular one with spectators,” he says. “He was the dad that I could always count on being right there at the edge of the green as I was coming up the fairway on the ninth hole.”

Working together at Bob’s has afforded Alan a rather close bond with his father, who he describes as “probably the most influential person in my life.”

“When it comes to the young plant division at Bob’s Market, he’s the captain of the team,” Alan says. “He’s one of those guys at Bob’s that everyone comes to and asks him what to do next. Sure, there are five sons, and he is the oldest, so I think it’s fair to say that they probably do look at him the most for leadership.”

“To me, that is what has built Bob’s Market’s young

## BOBBY BARNITZ

plant division into what it is today,” he adds. “You just do whatever it takes to make the customer happy. That’s what it’s all about, and I learned that just by watching him. So, I strive to be like him in that way, and then I add in a little bit of that younger generation style.”

Away from the greenhouse, the family loves to get away to their vacation cabin in the picturesque Smoky Mountains. Alan and Bobby also enjoy tackling DIY projects around the homestead, whether that’s cutting tiles for a new kitchen floor or working on one of the family vehicles in the garage.

“I’m the cutup of the family, the black sheep, the ornery one,” Alan says. “Now, he loves to cut up and have some fun, too. But when we’re working, it’s pretty serious stuff. He’s without a doubt my right-hand man. The guy is just amazing with numbers and on the end of a tape measure.”

Bobby enjoys watching sports in his downtime. His favorite teams are the Cleveland Browns, Cincinnati Reds and Boston Celtics. Unfortunately, he doesn’t get enough time away from the business to enjoy or pursue a ton of hobbies, according to Sue.

“He’s really never off the clock but isn’t that how it goes when you grow up and take over the family business?” she asks. “When you own a family business, you’re the one that gets all the phone calls and



As a manager, Bobby Barnitz leads by giving his employees the tools they need to get the job done, then gets out of their way.

everything; you’re the one that gets all the calls at midnight and on the weekends.”

It’s been an action-packed spring for the Barnitz clan, so much so that Sue says the last time they whisked away to their cabin in the Smokies was way back in December. Barnitz still finds time to unwind at home in Mason, though.

“Funny thing is, he still loves mowing his own grass,” she says with a chuckle. “I think that really gives him piece of mind, being able to just relax and take care of the yard on the weekends and make everything look nice.”

### The understudy

Lori Kelly has worked in Bob’s Market’s propagation department for nearly 30 years — 23 of them under Bobby’s wing — so she knows better than most what kind of

leader her boss is.

“I think he and I work very well together,” she says. “He’s a very focused and driven leader, so that’s something that I can respect and appreciate.”

Beyond that daily focus and drive to produce perfectly propagated trays for the customers, Lori enjoys Bobby’s hands-off management ethos.

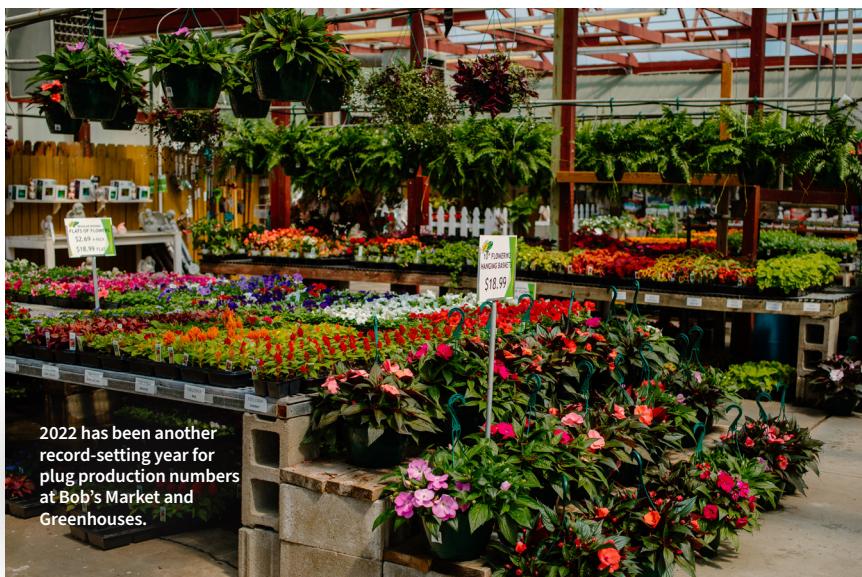
“His leadership style is to give his people all of the tools that they need to get the job done, and then he lets us do our jobs and we communicate as needed,” she says. “You’re not necessarily going to be micro-managed.”

Lori has been there right alongside Bobby as the propagation department as grown annually, taking on more and more plugs and trays each season.

“He wants to always look to increase our numbers when we can efficiently,” she says. “I’m not sure yet where exactly we’ll tap out this year in terms of plug numbers, but it’s looking like we’re going to be at least a shade higher than last year — which would be another record year.”

Record plug production numbers aside, Bobby is not solely a “focus on the numbers” type manager. His dedication to making sure things are going smoothly in propagation is another character trait his charges have taken notice of.

“[He’s just] very dedicated to any program he’s involved in and he always sees it all the way through to the end,” Lori adds. “If he promises you something, he will make it happen. It’s who we are at Bob’s Market — attention to detail, and we stand behind our word here. Bobby embodies that.”



2022 has been another record-setting year for plug production numbers at Bob’s Market and Greenhouses.