



# HORTICULTURAL INDUSTRIES Leadership Awards

Supplement to the July 2022 issues of:

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# Congratulations to the CLASS OF 2022

While the ornamental industry is continuously evolving, it's also an industry comprised of steadfast, committed professionals. Many of you have been in the business for many years, learning and pushing the industry forward. At Syngenta, we mirror that commitment, working diligently to expand product labels to include new uses, build new agronomic programs and develop solutions to meet the pest challenges you face each year.

As we continue to celebrate dedicated industry professionals, we are honored to partner with *Greenhouse Management* and *Nursery Management* for the sixth consecutive year to recognize the extraordinary individuals who have made significant achievements in the horticulture industry. Congratulations to the Class of 2022 Horticultural Industries Leadership Award winners:

- Brian Decker, Decker's Nursery
- Ron Caird, Por La Mar Nursery
- Jim Berry, J. Berry Nursery
- Bobby Barnitz, Bob's Market & Greenhouses
- Gina Falcetti, Skagit Horticulture
- The Saunders Brothers (Bennett, Tom, Jim and Robert Saunders), Saunders Brothers Nursery

We'd also like to congratulate this year's winner of the special educator award: Bridget Behe, Michigan State University.

Undeniably, the last two years have been difficult, but despite the challenges, these recipients demonstrated exceptional leadership and dedication, positively impacting customers, businesses and the

industry as a whole.

Most recently, we introduced Postiva™, a unique broad-spectrum, long-lasting fungicide that combines ADEPIDYN® technology in FRAC Group 7 and *difenoconazole* in FRAC Group 3. Postiva helps control difficult diseases such as *Fusarium*, leaf spots, Botrytis and powdery mildew, while also suppressing bacterial pathogens.

Additionally, as a result of our continued investment in research and development, we have introduced new and updated agronomic programs to help you manage the most common pests that affect poinsettias, spring bedding plants, mums, roses and more. These programs are thoroughly researched and incorporate some of the most trusted products in our portfolio, including Mainspring® GNL insecticide, and Mural®, Postiva and Segovis® fungicides.

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

Again, congratulations to the recipients of the 2022 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



*Xanthomonas* on Zinnia,  
2016 - Rechcigl

## Keeping it **UNDER CONTROL**

Utilize these tips to limit the spread of soil-borne and bacterial disease pathogens.

**O**rnamental plants are challenged by a number of fungal pathogens. These pathogens cause leaf spots, leaf blights, powdery mildew, leaf gall, root and stem rot, and vascular wilt. Accurate diagnosis of these diseases is crucial in their treatment, as misidentification can lead to an unmarketable crop. In the day-to-day running of a nursery or greenhouse, growers must tackle soil-borne pathogens such as *Fusarium spp.* as well as bacterial diseases caused by *Pseudomonas spp.* and *Xanthomonas spp.* pathogens.

To understand what's attacking your plants, let's begin with the basics. Fungi are multi-celled microbes that feed on living plants, producing spores that cause infection when carried by wind, water, insects and even production tools.

Bacteria are single-celled organisms that reproduce by simple cell division. Like their fungal counterparts, bacteria build up quickly under warm and humid weather conditions, spreading from plant to plant through water droplets.

Both fungal and bacterial pathogens can cause leaf spots, which often vary in size, shape and color. Some leaf spots have distinct margins surrounded by yellow halos, while others may be angular and blotchy.

If left untreated, these leaf spots may enlarge and spread over the entire leaf and to adjacent foliage. As leaf spots become more abundant, foliage will typically yellow and drop off. Growers should watch for tiny dot-like structures or moldy spore growth starting on lower leaves and progressing up the plant. A small hand lens or microscope with 10X-20X magnification

may be needed to catch these symptoms before they progress.

Diseases caused by *Fusarium spp.* present in several ways: as a foliar blight, root and crown rot and as a vascular wilt. Indications of root rot generally appear on above-ground plant parts as wilting, leaf discoloration or loss of vigor. A lack of results from fertilizing and watering is another sign of this fungal infection. To diagnose root rot, soil must be carefully washed from roots, which will likely be mottled with black or brown decay and spongy to the touch. In addition to *Fusarium spp.*, other pathogens such as *Rhizoctonia* and *Thielaviopsis spp.* and the water molds *Pythium* and *Phytophthora spp.* are the most common root rotting organisms.

Vascular wilt diseases, meanwhile, can be caused by several different pathogens including *Fusarium*, *Verticillium* and *Ophiostoma*. These pathogens restrict water flow to stems and leaves, causing individual limbs or branches to wilt and die. *Fusarium* and *Verticillium spp.* infections usually begin in the roots and spread internally throughout the plant.

Growers too often discover infections after the damage is done. Although the pathogen invades crops in early production stages, infections often go undetected until root and crown damage is evident.

“*Fusarium spp.* is also a very good saprophyte, meaning it does not even need a plant to live on,” says Dr. Ann Chase, owner of Arizona-based Chase Agricultural Consulting. “Once *Fusarium spp.* has infested, you can never get rid of it from the potting medium or from soil.”

### FIRST STEPS TO SAFEGUARDING ORNAMENTAL CROPS

First, growers should also be familiar with how diseases develop. Unrooted cuttings and young seedlings require warm temperatures, frequent misting or high humidity, which enable rooting into plant media. This environment also provides pathogenic spores with the optimal conditions to germinate and invade ornamentals via wounds and tender tissue.

Second, consider the condition of each plant. For example, *Fusarium* wilt,

caused by *Fusarium oxysporum*, occurs more frequently in stressed plants, so it is vital for growers to pay close attention to environmental conditions and implement proper growing practices to prevent added stress as the plant develops. “The list of plants most susceptible to *Fusarium spp.* and bacterial diseases is long; the most common susceptible plants include cyclamen, mums and dracaena,” says Chase.

Third, have a clear understanding of the symptoms of common diseases. Consider bacterial leaf disease for example. Many ornamental and edible plants display dark, necrotic-looking spots on their leaves, which may include black edged lesions, brown spots with yellow halos, or light and dark areas on foliage. Leaf spots can be found on leaf edges as well, where tissue appears brownish-yellow and becomes papery and delicate.

Bacterial leaf spot pathogens — *Pseudomonas spp.*, *Xanthomonas spp.* and others — normally do not pose a serious threat to plant health. However, they can negatively impact a crop’s overall appear-

## Features & benefits of Postiva fungicide for the ornamental grower

### Features

- Two unique modes of action in FRAC Groups 7 and 3
- Rapidly absorbs into plant tissue creating a rainfast barrier of protection
- Robust bacterial disease suppression against pathogens caused by *Pseudomonas spp.* and *Xanthomonas spp.*
- Can be applied by spray, drench, chemigation or cold fogging

### Benefits

- \* Excellent rotation partner to diversify programs for more comprehensive and broader-spectrum control
- \* Outstanding efficacy and long-lasting control of *Fusarium spp.*, powdery mildews, leaf spot diseases and bacterial pathogens (suppression)
- \* Flexible application methods fit for any growing operation

### Foliar and soil-borne disease control

Postiva™ fungicide offers protection against damaging diseases such as:

- \* *Fusarium*, *Rhizoctonia* and *Thielaviopsis spp.*
- \* Botrytis blight
- \* Powdery mildew
- \* Black spot
- \* Leaf spots, including anthracnose, scab, leaf blotch and shot hole
- \* Rusts
- \* Boxwood blight
- \* *Xanthomonas spp.* and *Pseudomonas spp.* (suppression)

### Postiva can be applied in:

- \* Greenhouses
- \* Nurseries, including field- and container-grown plants grown in outdoor structures
- \* Nurseries containing edible crops including vegetable plants and non-bearing fruit and nut plants grown for resale
- \* Conifer nurseries
- \* Residential and commercial landscapes



To learn how to perfect your program with Postiva, visit [GreenCastOnline.com/Postiva](https://GreenCastOnline.com/Postiva) or use the QR code.



ance when the water-soaked spots turn dark with a greasy appearance.

“Bacterial leaf spots are more common on tropical plants simply due to the amount of water needed to produce them,” Chase says. “We see *Xanthomonas spp.* infections on hibiscus and geranium, and cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage and broccoli, along with a multitude of others. *Pseudomonas spp.* has been common in the past on mums, hibiscus, cannily and a lot of foliage plants.”

### CONTROL DAMAGING DISEASES WITH PROVEN INNOVATIONS

Ornamental growers are far from defenseless when it comes to safeguarding their crops. Postiva fungicide, the latest from Syngenta, provides broad-spectrum and long-lasting protection against challenging fungal and bacterial diseases.

Postiva features two modes of action in FRAC Group 7 and FRAC Group 3. Postiva migrates from the leaf surface into the wax layer upon application, becoming rainfast to create a protective coating. Within hours, Postiva begins to penetrate plant tissue, providing systemic disease control.

Applications can be made by spray, drench, chemigation or cold fogging.

For the most effective control, growers should apply Postiva either prior to or at the first sign of disease. “Preventive applications will decrease populations of pathogens more effectively,” says Steve Dorer, brand manager for fungicides at Syngenta. “Early in their lifecycles, ornamentals create new foliage, so it’s easier for them to grow through those early symptoms. But when it’s late in the growth cycle, you don’t want symptoms that would make the plant unsellable. Prevention is always the key.”

With two modes of action, Postiva provides a strong defense against multiple pathogens while helping delay resistance development. Growers can rotate Postiva with Mural®, Palladium® and Daconil® brand fungicides from Syngenta, for robust protection against most diseases that threaten production.

“When you rotate or mix different modes of action, you’re improving your ability to control a pathogen in more than one way,” says Dorer. “Pathogens may develop a resistance to a particular pathway, so it’s important to limit the opportunity to develop

any resistance to your chemistry.”

“Postiva can be used on ornamental crops, vegetable plants and non-bearing fruit and nut plants grown for resale within nurseries and greenhouses. The chemical delivers a high level of control for diseases, impacting plants from root to canopy,” according to Chase.

“We have not seen any instances of phytotoxicity or plant damage yet, but you should always test new products on crops under your conditions to be sure,” Chase says. “I also never recommend curative applications, regardless of the kind of disease or the fungicide. They all work better preventively.”

Even the heartiest pathogen is not safe from Postiva, largely due to its robust ingredient combination and ability to halt pathogens before they can completely take over a crop.

“There are other products able to help control many different fungal and bacterial pathogens, but they have not proven to give the same high level of control, or they cannot be used as foliar and drench applications like Postiva,” Chase adds. 🌱

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# Putting a PLAN IN PLACE

Proper agronomic programming and cultural practices can lead to successful poinsettia production.

**P**oinsettias are one of the world's most popular plants, a ubiquitous holiday staple that fills shelves at garden centers and big-box retailers alike. However, a retail impact eclipsing \$1 billion doesn't make poinsettias any less susceptible to a withering lineup of diseases and insects. To stay ahead of damaging pests, growers must scout often for signs of infestations and deploy proper treatments when needed.

## KNOW THE DISEASE THREATS

Botrytis is the most common disease that affects poinsettias, with the threat being higher during propagation and at the end of production. Early infections appear as water-soaked spots on foliage and bracts. A gray, fuzzy mold develops from the spots, providing growers with a sure indication that the disease has established itself. To stay ahead of this costly disease, look out for other Botrytis warning signs, including V-shaped and tan-brown lesions on foliage. Plant wilt is another indicator that Botrytis has invaded a crop, as infected foliage withers and becomes laden with spores.

Poinsettias produced in cooler regions are typically at higher risk of powdery mildew infections. Fungi form white, talcum-like colonies on leaves, stems, flowers and bracts, with spots increasing in

size and number if left untreated. Not only does powdery mildew reduce a crop's aesthetic value, severe or unmanaged infections will eventually cause leaves to discolor and fall off.

"Depending on the region, the most common poinsettia pathogens alongside powdery mildew and Botrytis are *Pythium* and *Rhizoctonia spp.* Less common, though not be overlooked, are *Phytophthora spp.* and scab. Timing is everything when it comes to knowing what to look for and when," notes Nancy Rechcigl, technical field manager for ornamentals at Syngenta.

"From a foliar disease standpoint, leaf spots caused by *Alternaria* and *Xanthomonas spp.* can be problematic early in production, while powdery mildew and Botrytis are challenging during middle and late production," Rechcigl says.

## WHAT OF WHITEFLIES?

While scouting for disease, poinsettia growers must also be wary of plant-destroying insect infestations. Whiteflies are the most common damaging insects that affect poinsettias. "Adult and immature whiteflies insert their piercing mouthparts into the plant and extract plant sap, which affects plant vigor," says Rechcigl.

What makes whiteflies a challenging pest? First,



Alternaria leaf spot on poinsettia - Syngenta



Xanthomonas leaf spot on poinsettia - Syngenta

nymphs and eggs can be difficult to find because they often hide on the undersides of leaves. Additionally, whiteflies have a quick life cycle, and according to Rechcigl, female adult whiteflies can lay an average of 160 eggs, which hatch in about five to seven days. The lifecycle from egg to adult is two to three weeks, causing populations of these problematic insects to build quickly, so diligent scouting is critical.

When scouting for whiteflies, look for evidence of black, sooty mold, the result of honeydew secretion from the insects. Consider monitoring the crop with yellow sticky cards, placed just above the plant canopy, to detect adult activity.

“Typically, you would use one card per 1,000-3,000 square feet,” says Rechcigl. “It’s also important to physically check plants regularly for immature stages, looking at the underside of foliage in the lower, middle and upper canopy. A small hand lens with 10X-20X magnification can help with this.”

Along with scouting, whitefly management begins with proper cultural practices. “Employing proper sanitation is the first step toward mitigating initial whitefly populations,” says Stanton Gill, extension specialist in IPM and entomology at the University of Maryland. Growers should clean benches and floors before new plants are placed in the production area. Weed removal is another means of ensuring crop-hungry pests such as whiteflies and mites stay out of your production area. Additionally, it’s vital for growers to inspect unrooted cuttings and plants upon arrival from young plant suppliers.

“For a grower, the critical thing is to have a trust system set up with your supplier,” Gill says. “Suppliers need to keep plants clean because you don’t want to start off with a whitefly problem.”

## MAKE A PLAN FOR INSECT CONTROL EARLY

Using an agronomic program with built-in resistance management helps prevent insects and diseases from manifesting during production. A well-structured plan uses plant protection

products when problems are first observed or when conditions are most conducive to pest development.

Application and frequency should be based on pest pressure, product activity, your environmental conditions and pest lifecycle. Syngenta has created an agronomic program for poinsettia production that hinges on rotating products with different modes of action for optimal control and resistance management.

Multiple control options including Mainspring® GNL insecticide and Postiva™ fungicide deliver a built-in resistance management approach for insects and diseases, eliminating the need for corrective actions for a high-quality crop. Mainspring GNL — a systemic, non-neonicotinoid that shields crops from chewing and sucking insects such as thrips and whiteflies — contains the active ingredient *cyantraniliprole* in IRAC Group 28.

“Applied as a spray or drench, the insecticide works primarily through ingestion, acting like a shield after the pest ingests the ‘AI,’” says Rechcigl. “Whiteflies and other insects stop feeding within minutes, leading to mortality and keeping pest populations from growing to damaging levels.”

“While Mainspring GNL can be used as a spray, we recommend using it as a drench two to three weeks after the poinsettia crop is pinched. Because whitefly nymphs often hide on the underside of the foliage, it’s difficult to control whiteflies with spray applications alone. Systemic treatments are preferred and most successful because the product will move into the canopy as the plant

## Common poinsettia pests

### BOTRYTIS

- The disease is particularly threatening during propagation and at the end of production

- Initial infections result in water-soaked spots on foliage

- Once established, gray mold can spread throughout the crop and production area

- Botrytis is more likely to develop when leaves are wet for long periods, or humidity levels are greater than 85%

### WHITEFLIES

- Nymphs and eggs can be found on the undersides of leaves

- Development from eggs to adult can occur in as little as 14 days

- Whiteflies feed on plants with piercing, sucking mouthparts, causing infested foliage to become mottled before dropping

- Honeydew is secreted from the insects, resulting in black sooty mold



Scan the QR code to download the Syngenta poinsettia agronomic program or visit [GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions).

grows, providing protection throughout the production period,” Rechcigl adds.

Although Mainspring GNL is a strong option for whitefly control, growers also have natural options to eliminate these insect pests. Gill suggests dunking cuttings in an EPA-approved oil-based pesticide, which disrupts the metabolism of insect eggs as well as the ability of some insects to feed.

“The dunking method is for unrooted cuttings, although some poinsettias come in plug stage, so you can dunk those, too,” says Gill.

Entomopathogenic nematodes, meanwhile, serve as biological control organisms effective against various above-ground insects. *Hypoaspis miles* — a type of soil-dwelling mite — feeds upon insect pupae to provide pest control when used preventively. Mainspring GNL can be used in an IPM program with these biologicals as it has demonstrated good compatibility with them.

## USE MULTIPLE MOAs FOR OPTIMAL DISEASE MANAGEMENT

The most recent innovation in plant protection from Syngenta is Postiva fungicide, which provides broad-spectrum control of Botrytis, *Fusarium*, powdery mildew and other difficult-to-control diseases. Postiva is powered by two modes of action in FRAC Group 7 and FRAC Group 3. It moves from the leaf surface into the wax layer upon application, becoming rainfast and creating a protective coating. Postiva is generally applied as a foliar spray or as a soil drench and can be used in chemigation and auto cold-fogging systems.

“Postiva is proven to control more than 40 fungal diseases, while delivering addi-

tional suppression of bacterial diseases. For poinsettias, early application can thwart leaf spot diseases caused by *Xanthomonas spp.* and *Alternaria spp.* that commonly occur in the south. Later applications are more useful for stopping powdery mildew and Botrytis found in northern production areas,” Rechcigl says.

As fungal pathogens can build resistance to products with the same mode of action during repeated use, it is important to rotate Postiva with other effective fungicides from other FRAC Groups. A poinsettia agronomic program must consist of no more than two sequential applications per crop before switching to another effective product with a different mode of action.

“A well-structured program will

consider how best to utilize the products’ strengths and leverage modes of action when they will provide the maximum benefit,” says Rechcigl. “It also includes a resistance management strategy so no one mode of action is overused and applications stay within label allowances.”

Rechcigl has seen positive disease and insect control outcomes for growers using the Syngenta program during poinsettia production.

“The programs provide a framework on how to position products that will prevent the primary and secondary problems that could affect the crop,” Rechcigl says. “With resistance management and label compliance built into these programs, they’re for growers to follow and provide a framework for success.” 🌱



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# Prompt action KEEPS ROSES HEALTHY

Vigilance and education are the watchwords in preventing the spread of invasive diseases and pests.

**R**oses are a valuable crop in the greenhouse and nursery industry and a consumer favorite year after year. The plant's inherent flexibility makes it suitable for growing as cut flowers, patio decorations or for transplant into the garden.

Unfortunately, a myriad of insects and diseases are often waiting to spoil their elegance and beauty. However, growers that take the proper preventive measures — from cultural practices to chemical mitigations — can nurture a strong crop while keeping their plants safe from insects and infection.

“The best way to maintain a clean crop is to constantly scout for issues, although that won't always prevent the problem completely,” says Carson Cashwell, ornamental market manager at Syngenta. “Even the most detailed scouting won't uncover every issue. Applying fungicides and insecticides preventively will ensure that the necessary steps are taken to provide a pest-free crop.”

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Rose production occurs throughout the year in greenhouse and outdoor nursery environments. While year-round availability is great for growers and retailers, there are many different diseases and insects to watch for depending on the season. Spring through early fall is the domain of mites, aphids, black spot, downy mildew and powdery mildew, with overwintering mites taking residence beginning in October.

The diseases that can hinder rose production are caused by fungi, bacteria and plant viruses. Such infections can significantly harm rose health, and in worst-case scenarios,

interfere with production and sales. In early spring, growers should

begin checking plants for signs of downy mildew infections as this pathogen mostly prefers cool, moist conditions between 50°F and 75°F. This temperature range allows the infection to survive through spring and into the early summer months.

Caused by *Peronospora sparsa*, downy mildew attacks all types of roses in greenhouse, nursery and landscape settings. Symptoms are most commonly found on the foliage and stems. Early indicators are yellow-reddish blotches on the upper areas of leaves. Under humid conditions, downy mildew causes a fuzzy or downy growth on the underside of the leaves corresponding to the discolored areas. Infected leaves will defoliate causing the plant to become bare and weak.

In contrast, powdery mildew pathogens generally occur in early summer, characterized by white, powdery colonies that flourish on surfaces of leaves, shoots and buds. Early symptoms appear as chlorotic or reddish areas on the plant's upper surface, which are quickly covered by the white clusters that give the disease its name. Powdery mildew is caused by the fungal pathogen *Sphaerotheca pannosa* var. *rosae* (also known as *Podosphaera pannosa*). Untreated, the disease will stunt and disfigure leaves and rose buds, stopping them from opening and greatly reducing plant quality.

Many different leaf spotting pathogens can challenge



Black spot on rose, Untreated - Uber, 2020



Black spot on rose, Postiva™ fungicide 21 fl. oz. - Uber, 2020

roses during the summer months. Black spot (*Diplocarpon rosae*) is one of the most serious leaf spot diseases on roses. Cultivators surveying their crop for signs of infection may find dark brown or black lesions with a feathery margin, often surrounded by a yellow halo. Infected leaves turn yellow and drop prematurely, weakening plants so they produce fewer flowers. Additionally, stem cankers can develop on canes, initially displaying as red-purple blotches that darken and crack with age.

Leaf spots caused by *Cercospora spp.* can also be problematic on roses and can often be confused with black spot lesions. Infections caused by *Cercospora spp.* cause tan circular spots surrounded by a distinct reddish-purple to dark brown margin. Leaf spots caused by *Xanthomonas spp.* produce dark brown or black angular spots with a greasy appearance and yellow halo. Leaf spot diseases are more problematic in warm summer months when rainfall or dew is abundant.

“Vigilance and education are the watchwords for growers aiming to differentiate the various plant ailments targeting their crops,” notes Fulya Baysal-Gurel, a research assistant professor at Tennessee State University.

“Early diagnosis is important, as is managing spacing, sanitation practice implementation and utilizing fungicides,” Baysal-Gurel says.

## FIGHTING BACK AGAINST DISEASES AND INSECT PESTS

“Preparing your nursery or greenhouse for the inevitable disease- or insect-related pressure starts with impeccable cultural practices,” says Cashwell. This includes scouting for signs of disease and insect pressure, as well as removing plant debris from growing sites, where insects and disease pathogens can linger. Additionally, newly purchased plants should be carefully inspected before they’re added to your inventory, as they can introduce many unwanted diseases and insects.

Another recommendation is to thin

canes and remove foliage where possible to increase air circulation and reduce excess moisture. The same can be said for proper spacing of plants, with the added bonus of preventing disease spread.

After ensuring correct cultural practices are in place, plan ahead with a preventive agronomic program. “Meticulous production planning should include a preventive chemical plan,” explains Cashwell. “Syngenta offers growers numerous agronomic programs for the various production scenarios they will encounter throughout the year.”

Let’s take mites for example. Mites, particularly two-spotted spider mites (*Tetranychus urticae*), are hungry pests that flourish in dry, hot environments. Sharp growers will notice their specific coloring, which varies from a light yellow to yellow-green, with two dark spots near the abdomen. When feeding on the underside of rose leaves, spider mites leave yellow-white spots or “stippling” on upper foliage. Severe infestations leave webbing in the plant canopy, and heavily infested leaflets

will turn yellow and fall from the plant.

When battling these pests, an agronomic plan that includes an industry-leading miticide like Avid® 0.15 EC, will help safeguard roses from not only mites but also whiteflies, aphids and thrips.

A proactive approach to disease control will also give growers a leg up and begins with a program that includes the latest innovations. For example, the new Rose Agronomic Program from Syngenta includes Postiva™ fungicide. Recently introduced into the market, Postiva is powered by a unique combination of ingredients to control foliar and soil-borne diseases while suppressing various bacterial diseases. Postiva features two modes of action in FRAC Group 7 and FRAC Group 3. It migrates from the leaf surface into the wax layer upon application, becoming rainfast to create a protective coating. Within hours, Postiva begins to penetrate plant tissue, providing systemic disease control.

Another proven Syngenta solution is Mural®, a broad-spectrum fungicide

**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 diseases 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 these agronomic programs here:  
[GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions).



for use in greenhouses and outdoor nurseries. When applied at low use rates, Mural provides broad-spectrum disease control and observable plant-health benefits, such as increased root density. Baysal-Gurel explains further why a preventive plan is critical to producing a successful rose crop. “Roses can be latently infected with downy mildew pathogens. When conducive conditions such as cool weather and high humidity occur for disease development, symptoms may appear overnight,” says Baysal-Gurel. “Therefore, preventive fungicide applications in a rotation are critical to control downy mildew.”

Segovis® fungicide is a reliable treatment for

downy mildew and is best applied as a drench because of its systemic properties that provide a month’s worth of control. An effective downy mildew rotation uses three or more modes of action to provide maximum benefits and thwart the onset of pathogen resistance.

“The biggest benefit of following a disease management program from Syngenta is that you’re covered from the beginning of production to the end,” Cashwell says. “Any program we provide will contain recommended products to attack the key insects and diseases a grower will face. Programs developed by Syngenta also rotate modes of action, which will delay the onset of resistance.” 🌱



Visit [GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions](https://www.GreenCastOnline.com/Solutions) to access the Syngenta Rose Agronomic Program or use the QR code to the left to download the program.

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# FULL CIRCLE DISEASE CONTROL

A comprehensive portfolio of products proven to provide long-lasting, broad-spectrum disease control. Strengthen your disease management program with a combination of fungicides in 7 different FRAC Groups.



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

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®

# NOMINATE AN OUTSTANDING LEADER FOR THE HILA CLASS OF 2023

**R**emarkable leaders have great faith in their vision and their employees. They listen intently, they encourage others and they're honest. Rosalynn Carter said, "A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be."

Each year, *Greenhouse Management* and *Nursery Management*, with the support of Syngenta, honor six green-industry professionals who exemplify the leadership qualities needed to inspire and empower those around them and who work toward the betterment of the entire industry.

Who in the industry has inspired you?

Nominate them for a Horticultural Industries Leadership Award!

HILA is the only North American awards program to recognize recipients' exemplary contributions to the horticulture industry, such as:

- contributing to 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

making a positive impact on the industry  
"The green industry is full of considerate and compassionate people who care deeply for their employees, their community and their colleagues," says Kelli Rodda, editorial director. "It's a tremendous privilege to not only honor these industry leaders, but to learn and share their stories each year."

"The HILAs provide a perfect opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of extraordinary individuals in our industry," says Nick Collins, publisher. "We want to thank our long-time sponsor, Syngenta, for their continued support in helping bring the HILAs to the greenhouse and nursery markets."

We will begin accepting nominations for the HILA Class of 2023 beginning Oct. 1. In the meantime, visit our website, [hila.hortgroupevents.com](http://hila.hortgroupevents.com), to read about past winners.

## PAST WINNERS

### 2021 WINNERS

#### **DOUG COLE**

D.S. Cole Growers  
Loudon, New Hampshire

#### **DALE DEPPE**

Spring Meadow Nursery  
Grand Haven, Michigan

#### **GEORGE LUCAS**

Lucas Greenhouses  
Monroeville, New Jersey

#### **ALAN JONES**

Manor View Farm  
Monkton, Maryland

#### **TERRI MCENANEY**

Bailey Nurseries  
St. Paul, Minnesota

#### **ART VAN WINGERDEN**

Metrolina Greenhouses  
Huntersville, North Carolina

### 2020 WINNERS

#### **GEORGE AND LYNDA PEALER**

Millcreek Gardens  
Ostrander, Ohio

#### **STEVE CASTORANI**

North Creek Nurseries  
Landenberg, Pennsylvania

#### **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

# AN EXCEPTIONAL CLASS OF LEADERS *in* HORTICULTURE

There are myriad characteristics of impressive leaders. They are teachers who are also teachable. They possess endurance, whether they're on the mountaintop or in the valley. They are humble, yet confident in their actions and their team. They're courageous in the face of adversity. They always value integrity. They're self-aware and know when to admit to a mistake and learn from it. They're compassionate and strive to create strong connections. You'll find these traits in the Horticultural Leadership Awards Class of 2022. Now in its sixth year, please join *Greenhouse Management*, *Nursery Management* and Syngenta as we recognize seven deserving honorees who continuously work toward the betterment of the green industry.



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## CLASS OF 2022



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BY KELLI RODDA

# *Family culture, family growing*

The third generation of Saunders Brothers continue to grow their family business while preparing the next generation.

PW  
PROVEN  
WINNERS  
COLOR & CHOICE  
FLOWERING ASSOCIATION

(L-R) Robert, Jim, Bennett and Tom Saunders

**B**rothers Bennett, Jim, Robert and Tom Saunders operate the company that carries the family name. But when it comes to the multitude of people they consider family, that tree bears a few hundred branches.

Their father Paul first inspired them to treat employees like family.

“He wanted to establish a family culture in the business, and that’s carried through into our generation,” says Jim, the nursery’s human resources manager. “I hope it continues into the generation after us.”

Paul led by example. He cared deeply for the business, but more so enjoyed establishing relationships with the staff.

“He was so passionate about the business — the plants and especially the people,” Jim adds. “We’ve been very fortunate to attract great people who share in that culture and want to be a part of it.”

Nestled in the hills of Piney River, Virginia, Saunders Brothers Inc. is a fourth-generation nursery, orchard and farm market. In its nursery division, the company grows some 1,100 plant varieties on more than 250 combined acres of container and field produc-

## SAUNDERS BROTHERS

tion. Saunders Brothers specializes in boxwood, a crop that signifies exceptional economic importance and is purported to be the No. 1 selling evergreen shrub in the United States, according to USDA research.

Although the origins of producing boxwood started with their father when he was a boy in 4-H, the success the nursery has attained with this prevalent and popular plant rests in large part on the shoulders of the aforementioned extended family, which currently totals 150 full-time employees.

“Dad always taught us, ‘Take care of your people like you would your own family,’” says Robert, the nursery’s general manager. “We could not exist if it wasn’t for these 150 people who bust their tails for us each and every day. Our family is huge, and it goes beyond the Saunders name.”

Their mom, Tatum, regarded that same belief system and was like a mother to so many who worked for the nursery and the orchard.

“Mom helped create that family culture in the company, too. She fed meals to so many people over the years. She helped guys get their U.S. citizenship and helped them get their papers in order,” explains Tom, who manages the container operation. “They both taught us that employees are family, and to be close to them is something special.”

“Family for them is not just those with the Saunders name. It’s a delightful family experience,” Paul Westervelt says, who is the annual and perennial production manager and director of new plant R&D. “They celebrate the company talent no matter who you are, and they don’t try to hide it.”

Paul, who has been with Saunders for 17 years, also appreciates how the brothers lead by example.

“They are 100% above board all the time,” he says. “From a labor, environmental, safety standpoint — anything. They are never going to ask you to do anything shady.”

In one example of walking the walk/talking the talk, Paul recalls a time when one of their employees was not at his son’s soccer game, so Robert drove him to the field.

“There are so many stories ... They bought one employee the dentistry he needed, and they helped replace an appliance for someone. When Shreckhise Nursery suffered damage from a hailstorm, they helped with cleanup and some of the needs of their neighbor. It all goes back to being a part of the extended family.”

They buy into the rising tide lifts all boats concept, says Holly Scoggins, the program manager for NewGen boxwood. And

Saunders Brothers Inc. created an apprenticeship program to help train future leaders.



they’ve brought Holly into their extended fold.

“I’ve known them for years starting when I worked for Virginia Tech and they were very generous with plant and time donations. Now that I work here, I really feel like part of the family, something that makes me feel so good since my dad is in Georgia,” she says.

### A father’s legacy

Paul stayed active in the business until he suffered a stroke in 2021. But that didn’t keep him from nurturing those “family” relationships.

“We’d still ride around the nursery with him, and we’d stop at the shop and let him visit with everyone working in there,” Jim fondly recalls. “And his mind was still involved in the business, even if his body wasn’t. He’d remind us, ‘Don’t chase a nickel with a dollar.’”

Jim continues to foster those relationship-building lessons from his dad and makes connections with crew members.

“Once a day, I try to get in my truck and ride around the nursery and the orchard so I can maintain a relationship with the employees,” Jim says. “I want them to be able to talk to me about anything. I want to be approachable, and the best way to accomplish that is to be out on the property and let them know I’m available.”

Paul shared his enthusiasm and passion for people and plants throughout his life, something he instilled in Bennett, the general manager of Saunders Genetics.

“Dad was certainly one of my mentors. He was a dreamer and a visionary, and he was always a good cheerleader,” Bennett explains. “He was always enthusiastic and passionate. One of our

company's core values is passion, and he certainly had that. Passion is a necessary part of success in any endeavor — you've got to want it. We certainly have enthusiasm and passion for what we do here."

Paul died in March 2022, but his valuable life and business lessons prevail.

"He wanted us to be a business of integrity and honesty. And he wanted us to be enthusiastic about our work and be passionate about what we're doing," Jim says.

That lines up seamlessly with the company's core values: faith, integrity, passion and family.

"I learned the value of honesty from dad — honesty and integrity in everything you do," Robert says. "He also taught me to face problems as I see them and don't let them hang around. He used to say, 'If something's not right, talk about it and get it straight.'"

Paul taught all his children the value of work and a job done to the best of their ability.

"We didn't grow up watching cartoons on Saturday morning," Tom recalls, "we worked."

### Grooming the next generation

While the brothers aren't quite ready to completely retire from the company, they must find a way to recruit and retain the next generation of leaders. This year, Saunders Brothers introduced a 40-week apprenticeship program designed for participants "to get a BS in Saunders Brothers," quips Robert.

His oldest son Price, who worked outside of the family business for several years, is the first participant. Aside from Price, several members of the fourth generation work for the family business. Company policy states that family members can't come back and work at the farm (as adults) until they spend at least three years working for someone else.

So far Price has spent time in the HR department, about a month in the field operations and time on the shipping dock. Next, he'll go on the road with sales, accompany delivery drivers on their routes and spend time in retail.

"It's total immersion in every phase of the company so he'll have a better idea of who we are and what we are," Robert explains. "That program is built on the 'why' and Price is asking a lot of questions."

The company is growing quickly and



Saunders Brothers has experienced growth and is currently expanding.



The nursery continues to look for new box-wood varieties that are disease and pest resistant.



All employees are considered family members, which is something Paul Saunders inspired.

## SAUNDERS BROTHERS



New genetics of boxwood breathed life into that market.

there's a need for continuity between departments and the brothers believe this program will help, Robert says.

"We're working to create a new generation of leadership in our company, which is our biggest need right now," Bennett says. "The four of us are still around and working and committed, but we want to attract more people and mentor them while we're still able."

They expect to be able to place people who complete the apprenticeship program in middle management positions.

"Through this program, we can show the depth, width and breadth of all aspects of the business," Jim says. "And as they progress through the program, we will see where they fit in the business long term. It's a good way of shoring up our future." A second person has recently started the program, too. And several of Saunders Brothers' current employees have expressed interest in the program.

"We need to find good people and identify good pegs and find where that peg fits into the system," Robert says. "It's like a 40-week interview and all the department heads are watching."

Participants are required to submit a report every Thursday night and answer a set of questions, talk about their experiences and rate the department.

So far, the team is "thrilled" with the program, Robert adds.

They're confident the apprenticeship program will help communicate the many opportunities within the company to the younger generation. It doesn't come without a cost.

"If a process or department uses five people, we'll have six on it including the apprentice," Robert adds. "But the return in the long term is going to be huge."

### Boxwood victories

Boxwood production has been a part of Saunders Brothers Inc. for around 75 years and the family has been on the cutting edge of market advances for decades. In the '70s and '80s, Paul began a



quest to find plants that were resistant to boxwood decline, a disorder that was devastating to English boxwood. By the '90s he'd set up testing sites and was collecting data. While he was looking for cultivars that may be resistant to boxwood decline, he discovered plants with traits such as boxwood leafminer resistance, cold hardiness and aesthetic features.

"By the late '90s, dad had collected enough data to publish a national boxwood trials report and had built up a significant amount of germplasm," Bennett says.

This germplasm collection was significant and advantageous when boxwood blight hit the market in 2011.

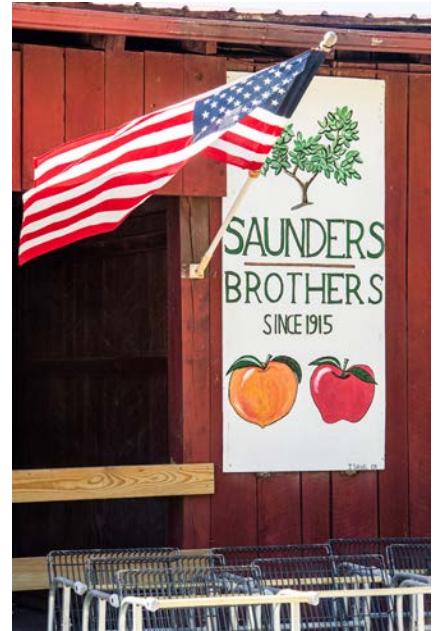
"We started testing for boxwood blight, which formed the pillars of our genetics work," Bennett says. "We were also screening for blight and leafminer resistance, as well as grower and landscape friendliness and, of course, the 'wow' factor."

For eight years, they tested more than 150 cultivars with the help of former NC State University researcher Kelly Ivors. In 2018 they created Saunders Genetics and launched the NewGen brand of boxwood, designed to provide the market with plants that are resistant to boxwood blight and other diseases, as well as leafminer resistance.

"And we've only seen the tip of the iceberg in terms of cultivars," Bennett says. "No real work had been done on boxwood



While the brothers put in a lot of hours at the nursery, in the fall they enjoy attending Virginia Tech football games.



The Saunders family has been serving their employees and the community since 1915.

breeding in the U.S. since the Sheridan cultivars in the '60s. Other companies avoided boxwood because it's such a long game with a slow-growing plant."

It's been a game changer in the market for this economically valuable plant, Holly says.

"When boxwood blight was spreading throughout the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic, they got in front of it on several levels, not just for their nursery but all nurseries and other green industry companies," she says. "They're considered leaders in that field."

NewGen helped put some stability back in the marketplace, especially along the eastern seaboard, says Tom Demaline, owner of Willoway Nurseries in Avon, Ohio.

"It reinvigorated the marketplace," he says.

Willoway is one of the founding companies in SynRG, the organization behind the Handpicked for You program. Willoway asked Saunders to join SynRG because "their core values aligned with ours, Tom says.

"Their approach to business helps balance out the SynRG group. They ask questions and don't have knee-jerk reactions," he adds.

Saunders Genetics is also working with a breeder in Wis-

consin to identify cold-hardy boxwood. They currently have thousands of plants in testing.

"It will revolutionize the boxwood just as brands have done for hydrangeas, for example," Bennett says. "Hopefully we're about three or four years from releasing some cold-hardy selections."

**Besides beautifying the planet, Saunders is committed to protecting it.**

"One of the greatest things we've done is work with the University of Florida to help develop a method for irrigating based on the evapotranspiration (ET) rate of plants," Tom explains.

The system bases water application on daily environmental factors including temperature, solar radiation and rainfall. It also considers the size of the plants.

"It has cut our water usage by 69% or more in some plants," he says.

In turn it's also helped the nursery reduce its fertilizer and pesticide use, he adds.

"Whether it's water conservation, monitoring runoff or recycling plastic, we believe in leaving a place better than how we found it," he says.

# leading by **DOING**

*Gina Falcetti built her career by embracing challenges head-on and is helping the next generation build theirs.*

BY CHRIS MANNING

A career in horticulture wasn't Gina Falcetti's original plan. Growing up near Litchfield, Connecticut, Gina says she originally dreamed of being a veterinarian, but the cost was too high. Instead, fresh out of high school, she spent a short time working in a factory and then took a seasonal job at White Flower Farm to earn some money as she tried to figure out her career path. Instead, she fell in love.

"I immediately fell in love with plants," she says. "I've always been really hard working, so this worked for me."

"I'm a farmer at heart — I love plants, animals and the outdoors. I like to learn. I like variety. When you're in a factory, you're doing the same thing all day long. I was actually at a sewing factory making motorcycle luggage. I needed money, so I took that job. It wasn't long before I knew that wasn't going to work. With plants, I was actually interested."

After a short period of time in her seasonal position, Falcetti was approached by White Flower's then general manager, Heidi Heath, about applying for a full-time job in propagation.

"I said, 'but I don't have the qualifications,'" Gina recalls. "And she just said, 'just apply for it, Gina.' So I did and they gave it to me." In addition to Heidi, Gina credits three mentors at White Flower — David Smith, Michael Dodge and Arthur

Gilman, all three experienced nurserymen — for helping her navigate her new role in propagation.

"I was enjoying myself every day," she says. "I had people invested in me, challenging me."

She started in propagation during the 1980s. In learning on the job, Falcetti says she was able to work with perennials at a time when perennials weren't as popular as they are today and worked with nearly 900 different varieties.

"We did stratification of seeds and grafting and all kinds of unusual production methods, so it was a great place to learn a lot about plants and learn a lot about production." Just three years after taking on a role she wasn't sure she was ready for, Gina was promoted to head propagator.

Today, Gina is still a leader in her role — albeit on a different coast. She is currently the head liner grower at Skagit Horticulture, a wholesale operation based in Mount Vernon, Washington. And like Heidi, David, Michael and Arthur helped her, she works now to help the next generation of growers find their footing.

"You have to give people the tools, but you have to challenge people to get them interested," she says. "If you give people opportunities, they will continue to grow — even if they struggle."

Corey Hill, Skagit's operations manager, says Gina excels at blending personnel management and production management.

"She's so good at growing the best

product, but never at the detriment of her crew. She always goes to bat for her crew," Corey says.

## **Moving West**

In late 1993, about nine years after starting at White Flower, Falcetti went to an event in Chicago where she was asked to make a presentation about producing perennials from seed. It was there that her career outlook changed.

At the event, she received a job offer to relocate to Washington and work at Summer Sun Greenhouses, a large operation producing bedding plants and hanging baskets. When Gina came on board, they were beginning to launch a perennials division with an agreement in place with Ball Seed. (Summer Sun was later sold to Color Point and renamed Etera, but no longer is operational.)

Looking back, she says there was some "fate" involved because of where she was at in her life. She was in a relationship that wasn't working out and she needed to move on. She was also still living where she had grown up and was looking for a new challenge.

"I had met Carl Loeb at this event and he said, 'I'm going to send you a plane ticket and have you come out' and all of this stuff," she says. "I went home just hoping they were going to call and that this was a real option for me. ... I'm not a very fearful person. But I gave myself a week to go out, check out the job and see if it was for me."

When she went out West, Gina says



ALL PHOTOS BY JAKE GRAVBROT PHOTOGRAPHY

## GINA FALCETTI

she hit it off with her prospective bosses and was intrigued by the job, perhaps enough to take it on her own merits. But, perhaps more importantly, Gina spent most of her week exploring what would become her new home in the Pacific Northwest. She went to the beach, the mountains and various parks to see if the surrounding environment fit what she was looking for. It did.

“It was a beautiful place and I felt I could do the job, even if it could be a challenge,” she says.

Three weeks later, she moved across the country to her new job and new environment without a solid plan.

“Two suitcases and a cat,” she says with a laugh. “I flew and I left everything. Part of [being able to do this] was my personality, but also my parents and my upbringing. My dad said, ‘Gina, if you don’t do this, you’re never going to know. You have the courage to make changes.’ So it’s partly me, but it’s my upbringing in that we were taught to be hardworking and take opportunities when they arise.”

### Building a career and life

Once she moved to the region in 1994, she’s never looked back.

“I love the climate,” she says. “Being an outdoors person, I love the mountains and the ocean — it’s great to have it close. And it’s great for growing plants. Overall, it’s pretty temperate where we are here along the Puget Sound.”

Her career in the region has also seen its share of changes, including the sale of Summer Sun and the closure of Etera. But at Etera, she was able to travel to Germany to learn more about plant production and get her name out in the industry, specifically in her new home region.

Just two days after Etera filed for bankruptcy, Skagit Gardens called her and offered her a job. She immediately said yes. She’s had several jobs there, but primarily has focused on new products and stock management.

“It was a lot of exposure to new things,” she says. “This part of my career was all about plants. I had a few employees, but it was more interacting with breeders and



“If you go and find her in the greenhouse, there’s always a lot of people wanting to pick her brain,” says Debbie Thorne, Skagit’s head of sales.

with the plants directly.” She stayed in that role until 2013, when she started looking away from Skagit for a new challenge. That included an interview with (and offer from) Center Greenhouses in Colorado.

“I just had a bad feeling about leaving the Pacific Northwest,” she says. “I had this gut feeling that I shouldn’t.” At the 11th hour, an old boss, Bruce Gibson, called her to join Northwest Horticulture and stay in the Pacific Northwest. As it so happened, Northwest Horticulture was housed on the old Etera property.

Then, in 2014, Northwest merged with Skagit Gardens, and she’s been with Skagit ever since. And over time she transitioned away from new product development and into her current propagation focus with more managerial responsibilities. This past year, that involved Skagit shipping plants the week of Easter for the first time.

Gina doesn’t envision working forever, saying she doesn’t want to “hold her ground” and prevent other people from having the opportunities she’s had. She’ll turn 60 in 2022. There’s a family she’d like to spend



Falcetti got her start in horticulture in her native Connecticut, but made her career (and a new home) in the Pacific Northwest.

more time with. She’s also a passionate vegetable gardener who grows most of her own food and has interest in running her own CSA during retirement. She also works with a horse rescue program in her spare time.

“It’s not that I don’t want to work,” she says. “I just want to have more time for those things. When you’re a grower, you have no time. You work weekends, holidays, all the time. I want to pass off responsibility to capable people so I have more time to do what I want to do.”

### Leadership by example

Amanda Milner, one of the head growers responsible for finished products at Skagit,



"Gina is probably the most passionate person about the greenhouse industry that I have met," Amanda Milner says.

has been at the grower for two years now. She didn't meet Gina until she started at Skagit, but now views her as a mentor.

"Gina is probably the most passionate person about the greenhouse industry that I have met," Amanda says. "It's not just a love of plants, but she wants to see everyone and every process we have exceed its potential. She's the kind of person that I rarely hear say she has a problem or an issue; it's usually offering up three different solutions."

"It's a really refreshing, positive view. She's energetic, she's upbeat. And she has so much knowledge. She took me under her wing when I started and not only showed me the ropes with finished [product], but also mentoring me with propagation and making sure that I'm fully aware of how things work here," Amanda says.

Similar to Gina, Amanda came to Skagit as the new grower in a new environment. On top of that, Amanda started her new role during the COVID-19 pandemic. She, in her own words, says the on-boarding process was a "bit overwhelming."

"She took the time to not only make sure I felt good about my day-to-day, but also made sure I knew people in the company, and she'd take me around to introduce me to the people that I'd need to talk to get things done," Amanda says. "She made sure I felt steady and comfortable and excited to

come to work like she is."

Corey, Skagit's operations manager, describes Gina as the exact kind of employee every operation needs: transparent, hard-working and never needs to be worried about.

"There's never surprises," he says. "She's really good at looking forward, she's really good at planning. And when she has an issue, she always brings a solution with it. She comes with ideas about how to fix an issue but is also open to other options. I feel like I never get blindsided by Gina."

According to Corey, Gina's communication is the "most important" trait to provides, both as a part of the Skagit team, but for others to look to and learn from.

"Many of our inefficiencies come from that last-minute panic or not being prepared for what we walk into," Corey explains. "We can deal with a lot when we know it's coming. We can figure stuff out. But if the problem comes without time to implement a solution, it's a problem. Gina keeps us working ahead."

Gina's communication extends to working with anyone at Skagit, from someone just starting out like Amanda to someone with decades of experience, according to Corey

"Gina builds trust quickly. She's honest with everyone. She expects a lot, but gives lots and lots of support," he says. "That helps her build a very strong team."

"If you go and find her in the greenhouse, there's always a lot of people wanting to pick her brain," says Debbie Thorne, Skagit's head of sales. "In our industry, there's not always a lot of experience that comes in. Even with people who have no experience, Gina helps build them up.

With Amanda, that involves helping her transition to a specific role. Gina is trying to move away from some of her young plant responsibilities to give Amanda her own chance to run that department. At the same time, Gina will move into a production manager role where she will focus more on people than plants.

"It's time, right?" Gina says. "It's time for a younger person to take that responsibility. And it's great to have someone like Amanda ready to step into that role. And at the same time, we need a production manager. So I'm looking at everything going on and what gaps we have and am just thinking 'oh let me try it. I think I can do this.'"

"To be a great supervisor," Gina says, "you have to have the same expectations for yourself that you have for others. You have to be willing to work as hard as you expect people to work and be reliable and available. There's nothing worse than a boss that's never around when you need them and doesn't match your effort."

JIM BERRY



# CHANGING *markets & lives*

By challenging the status quo and elevating others, Jim Berry continues to make his mark in the horticulture industry.

BY JOLENE HANSEN

A conversation with Jim Berry is filled with easy laughter, gratitude and lots of wisdom about people, plants and living life with courage and grit. With half a century in the horticulture industry, he's left an indelible trail of plants he's touched and lives he's influenced. But Jim's path to the success he now enjoys as co-owner and president of J. Berry Nursery wasn't straight or smooth.

Jim's story started in North Central Texas on his family's diverse farm. The Berrys ran some cattle and farmed cotton and peanuts alongside crops such as watermelons, pecans, black-eyed peas and sweet potatoes. The nine siblings pitched in on whatever needed to be done.

"My dad taught us to always do the right thing and don't give up. Give it your best effort and have confidence in who you are," Jim recalls. "Even though he was just a farmer, he was a dang good farmer. He encouraged his kids to think outside the box and take the road less traveled."

When the time came for Jim to go to college, agriculture was the obvious choice. Jim jokes he chose horticulture for two reasons:

"I enjoyed the watermelon, pecans and sweet potato aspects of what we did — and that's the only time I saw cash in the family." But money didn't drive his decision. "I honestly enjoyed horticulture more than the other agronomic or livestock aspects," he says.

Jim started at Tarleton State University, got his bachelor's degree at Texas A&M, then studied for a master's at the University of Arkansas. Even in those early years, he displayed the confidence and determination that define his horticulture career.

Dr. David Creech, professor emeritus at Stephen F. Austin

(SFA) University and director of the SFA Gardens, remembers his 1960s Texas A&M classmate — a fellow rebel in the horticulture club who shared his curiosity for plants.

"Jim went into the industry, and I went into academics. We've stayed friends for 50 or 60 years," David says. Referencing the peaks and valleys Jim endured in those decades, David is succinct: "He's a real survivor."

## A home and a mentor

After college, Jim worked in the vegetable industry before landing a propagator position at Greenleaf Nursery in El Campo, Texas. During his four-plus years there, he made his first mark in the nursery industry. As his horticultural inclinations combined with master's

studies in plant breeding, he excelled at propagation. "At Greenleaf, I was such a newbie that I just executed the plan," he recalls. But that work set the course for what would follow.

From Greenleaf, Jim went to Hines, a Houston startup at the time. A year or so later, he left Texas for Alabama's Flowerwood Nursery, where he stayed for 25 years. At Flowerwood, he found a home for his talents and a

mentor who still resonates.

"Mr. Sidney B. Meadows with Flowerwood Nursery mentored so many," Jim recalls. "He could have been governor. He could have been senator. He was a psychologist; he was a salesman; he was a public speaker; he was a life coach. He was just inspiring and built others up to their potential."

At Flowerwood, Jim was first able to express himself through multiple aspects of the horticulture business. "I had the science of plant production down to a pretty high level, and I had com-



## JIM BERRY



Hibiscus breeding is one of Jim Berry's top projects.

petent staff at Flowerwood," he says.

And that paved the way for further success. "God puts great plants in my way, and I take notice and bring them to market," he says.

Jim's achievements didn't surprise his college chum. "I think he has real good business sense, but underneath the whole thing — what I think a lot of people miss about him — he's really a plantsman. He's kind of a geek," David says.

### Shoved through a door

Look around J. Berry Nursery today, and it's easy to assume the nursery's founding in 2006 was a long-time dream of nursery ownership come true. But Jim is quick to correct — that was never his dream.

"Every nursery that I'd worked at, I took possession psychologically," he says. "I took ownership in my responsibilities."

But change came — swift and unexpected — when he was fired from Flowerwood's Plant Development Services. "God shoved me through that door and I'm so thankful," he says.

That's when his son Jonathan, now J. Berry Nursery co-owner and vice president, came forward. "He was the driver for me," Jim remembers. "He said, 'Dad, Let's do something together.' I wasn't afraid. He wasn't afraid. I had that level of confidence in myself and in my son."

And so a business partnership and a business plan were born.

The pair settled on a site in Grand Saline, Texas, with all the necessary ingredients for success. And J. Berry Nursery launched

with Home Depot as its first customer.

"My previous history had impacted Home Depot fairly significantly, so I had a notoriety and a reputation — good or bad, depending on who you ask," Jim says, with a chuckle.

Then, he was granted a license to propagate Knock Out roses, one of the hottest plants and biggest sellers in the market.

When the recession hit only two years after opening the Texas site, J. Berry Nursery stayed the course, unaffected by the housing market collapse and subsequent loss of landscape business many growers struggled through.

"I never had a landscape supply business, so when housing collapsed, I didn't miss that. I had the Home Depot market and people were still value-shopping. So, I had the right product, in the right economy, with the right customer," Jim recalls.

But struggles still came. Oversupply hit the Knock Out rose market in tandem with the recession, and Jim wondered at times how they'd make payroll or pay the bills.

"Those were scary times," Jim says. "But I've had committed friends and partners that stood behind me, and for that, I am forever grateful."

Then J. Berry's focus on R&D and diversification took on added importance for its future.

**Disrupting markets and marketing**  
J. Berry Nursery was founded to bring in-

novative, high-value plants to market.

"That was what I felt like my ability was and that's where the opportunity was," Jim says.

Marketing and market disruption have figured largely in the nursery's success.

Jim recalls the Flower Carpet program of the late 1990s, calling it "an opportunity to get a master's degree in horticultural marketing." With its pink pots and proven marketing strategy, the program taught Jim he had a knack for plant marketing.

A defining moment came when Jim heard Dr. Lowell Catlett, an ag economist and futurist from New Mexico State University, speak 20 years ago.

"He told a group of nurserymen that the market is fluid and that change is accelerating. That really weighed on me," Jim recalls. "So, if the market is fluid, do I want to respond to the changing market? Or do I want to cause the change? So, I set out to be a market disruptor."

From the beginning, J. Berry Nursery invested heavily in research and development, yielding industry-changing brands like Black Diamond Crapemyrtles, Déjà Bloom Azaleas and Hollywood Hibiscus. While marketing plays a huge role, that's not where it starts.

"I first start with science," Jim says. "I've got to have a plant that is extraordinary." And the consumer is always in mind.

“Whoever’s buying our plants needs to have more success — more beauty, fewer costs, longer value, fewer chemicals to apply,” he continues. “If the grower finds these plants to be easier to grow and more beautiful, the homeowner is going to do that, too. And if I truly keep that consumer in mind, then there will always be a market for J. Berry plants.”

The nursery’s business model moving forward calls for its income to be balanced between finished product and licensing of intellectual property, brands and plant patents. Though it’s not there yet, it’s well on its way.

### Joy in those he leads

In Jim Berry’s eyes, requirements for leadership are straightforward: You’ve got to have a vision, know your field of expertise and be able to teach it by elevating those you lead.

“I’m very proud of my development of talent over time. A lot of nursery professionals that have made a mark with their own career, I can look back with pride that maybe I helped them get where they are,” he says.

When asked about his team, Jim starts with Jonathan: “He’s an inspiration to me. He’s so focused and so dependable and so smart. And he is a model for my whole team. Basically, Jonathan answers to me and then everybody else in leadership answers to him. So he is a seasoned business owner and a darn good nurseryman. We’ve done this together.”

Jim speaks with appreciation and pride about J. Berry’s many dedicated, long-term employees, as well as his young team of hires (highlighted in *Nursery Management’s* January 2022 issue). “Some of them are going to be movers and shakers for a long time in our industry,” he adds.

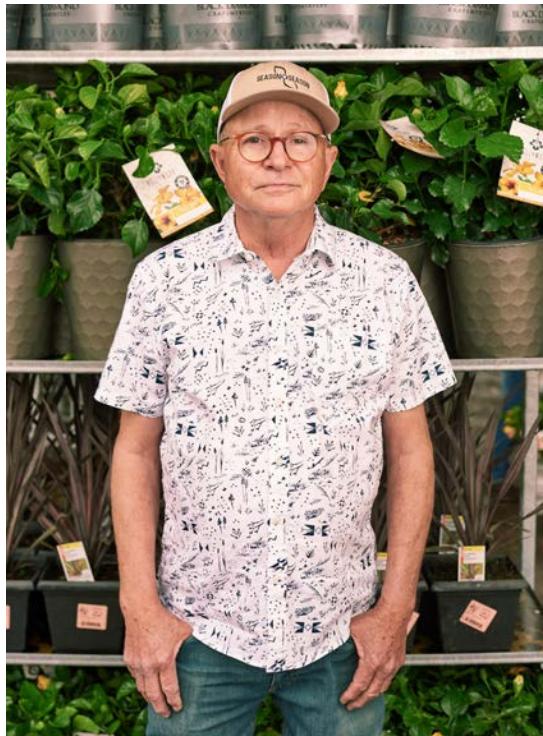
James King, operations manager at J. Berry, remembers interviewing for a position as head grower in 2008. With a

tree background and no shrub experience, he still got hired. “Jim gave me a chance. I’ve learned everything I know about shrubs, literally, from Jim Berry,” James says. “He’s a mentor to me. I’m still learning from him.”

James describes a work environment where respect for and from employees goes both ways, where integrity, real caring and working side by side are the norm. “Jim’s real personal — he’s out there nearly every day talking with everybody, spending time with us and walking the crops, teaching us what he’s learned,” he says.

David also expresses regard for Jim’s management style.

“He gives them leadership and he gives them compliments ... He basically tries to prop people up and give them an opportunity to make a show for themselves,” he says. “He’s not just a great nurseryman and a great manager, but he’s also a real good human being. I’ve always admired that. He takes great joy in his staff and them excelling, and that’s kind of a rarity. That is probably his real strength at J. Berry Nursery.”



### Much more ahead

Beyond horticulture, Jim enjoys travel and cooking. Word has it his gumbo is the best around. And with anything that goes on a smoker, he’s hard to beat. But he doesn’t plan on retiring to hone his cooking skills anytime soon.

“Here’s when I’ll retire: When I’m physically or mentally not able to work or if I don’t enjoy working anymore. If I’m detracting from the value of the company, I should leave. And — I hope this will never come to pass — that I’m not wanted at the company,” he says, chuckling again. For now, he’s right where he wants to be, doing exactly what he wants to do.

Looking back on his accomplishments, Jim acknowledges being responsible for propagating millions of useful plants and transforming markets, multiple times. But he gives credit to those who’ve influenced, enabled and supported him — especially his wife, Martha.

“I’m just blessed to have had the life that I’ve had,” he says. “I would encourage people. If I’ve traveled the world — and I have — you can, too. So don’t be afraid. Go through open doors. If you are content where you are, that’s where you will stay. But if you aspire, you’ve got to be courageous.”

Reflecting on Jim’s HILA award, Jonathan says his father has always challenged the status quo in life and in business.

“This mindset is pervasive throughout our business and is clearly articulated with our core values of leadership, innovation, integrity and resilience,” Jonathan says. “His leadership has positioned our company as one that is known for innovation, especially with new product development and marketing. This award is a fitting recognition of his remarkable career as a mentor, leader and market disruptor.”

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BRIAN DECKER



Founded by his grandfather in 1921, Brian Decker has started a succession process with key members of his team.

# RACE to the future

Brian Decker has evolved Decker's Nursery by embracing technology and continually searching for a better way to do everything.

BY MATT MCCLELLAN

At Decker's Nursery, there is one greenhouse that doesn't look like all the rest. The Groveport, Ohio, nursery is bursting with cutting-edge technology and equipment. But that one house has sentimental value to Brian Decker, third-generation nurseryman and president of Decker's Nursery.

"We didn't even know where the property lines were, so that's why it's so crooked," Brian says. "It doesn't have a thing in it. But I just can't stand to tear it down yet, because my dad and I worked on it for two years on Sundays, bending the steel ourselves."

Decker's Nursery, which celebrated its 100th year in business last year, provides local and national retailers and growers with wholesale shrub liners, specialty conifer grafts and finished material. The company was founded in 1921 by Brian's grandfather, Paul Offenberg, an immigrant from Holland. Paul was a professionally trained horticulturist who had been Royal Garden Advisor for Kaiser Wilhelm prior to the beginning of World War I. The business was named The Paul Offenberg Nurseries, and was located in Columbus, Ohio, where it handled propagation, grafting, liner production, retail landscaping and general retail sales.

Brian's father, Bernard J. Decker, worked as an ornamental iron and steel worker after he came home from World War II, where he served as a decorated radio operator and gunner in the U.S. Air Force over Europe. He knew his way around the legendary B-17 "Flying Fortress," but he wasn't much of a plantsman. In 1953, Paul asked him to join the family business anyway. Brian's grandfather died a year later,

leaving Bernard with the challenge of running the company.

Brian learned lots of valuable lessons from his father, including how to graft plants. Brian had an aptitude for the art from a young age. When he was in sixth grade, he received a Superior rating at the State Science Fair for his project, which focused on grafting and propagation of *Hedera helix* (English ivy).

In 1979, Brian graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in horticulture and joined his father's business. It was just the two of them. In 1980, the business was renamed Decker's Nursery and relocated to its current location in Groveport on a 10-acre parcel.

Bernard grew up during the Great Depression, and like many of his generation, it taught him to live, lean and get by on as little as possible.

"My dad could do everything better than anyone else, so there was no reason to hire anybody or delegate," Brian says. "It took me a long time to unlearn that."

But Brian took his education seriously and even then, he was looking for ways to apply what he had learned to improve their



business.

"I graduated from Ohio State with a brand-new degree in horticulture and a minor in business, and I was out there with a crew of three guys hoeing weeds for nine hours," Brian says. "My dad didn't believe in any kind of herbicide usage or chemical control at all. And he pulled up in his air-conditioned car, and he rolled the window down. And I said, 'Dad, I didn't go to school for four years to be out here hoeing out-of-control weeds that are 4-foot-tall when the

## BRIAN DECKER



plants are 6-inches-tall. I'm not going to do this."

After calling up Dr. Elton Smith, herbicide specialist at the OSU Extension, Brian was able to convince his father to change his ways. It was a triumph of a strong-willed son over a similarly strong-willed father, and it was certainly not the only dispute they had.

"Did we get in arguments? Oh, epic," Brian says. "There's still a hole in the office wall where he threw a stapler at me."

### Widening his view

Although Brian says his father, who died in 2012, was an incredible mentor, the two men had different goals for the family business, as well as different methods. Over the years, Brian has seen many nursery owners fall into the trap he always strived to avoid.

"The most dangerous words in the nursery industry are 'because that's the way my dad did it,'" Brian says.

Brian joined many trade associations and found incredible value in attending industry meetings. He joined looking to widen his perspective from the small family business he knew. He found that he loved meeting other growers and talking over their shared difficulties and working out solutions. Alan Jones, president of Manor View Farm and member of the HILA Class of 2019, is one of Brian's good friends. Like Brian, Alan volunteers on many industry boards and committees.

"I've heard Brian frequently make this comment about attending industry meetings," Alan says. "I just need to bring back one new idea and I will have covered

the cost of the meeting."

Brian learned a lot about management, budgets, marketing, staff issues and legislative issues by participating in industry associations like The Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association, American Nursery & Landscape Association, Horticultural Research Institute, International Plant Propagators Society and others.

The peers he met through these groups showed him different leadership methods and helped "calm my rash behaviors," as Brian says. They also sparked his creativity.

"Brian is an original thinker — sometimes outspoken — who is always thinking ahead to the next project, the next issue and the next solution," Alan says. "His original thinking can at times cause people to stop and think about what he is proposing and often disagree with him. But that is partly what Brian is hoping to achieve — while you may not agree with his initial suggestion, it gets you to think about the issue from a different perspective and possibly come up with an even better solution."

In 1993, Brian was starting his term as president of the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association. As part of the position, he had to write an article each month for the association's magazine. His father still did payroll by hand. Brian hated the hassle (and bottles of white-out) that came with using a typewriter. He saw this as the perfect opportunity for the business

to get a computer. Not only would he use it to type his president's letters, but he could use it to modernize the nursery in other ways, like accounts payable, payroll, and eventually inventory management software.

Brian's adoption of technology led to a situation that illustrates the difference between his view and others in the industry. With printer, paper and software advances from the computer, Decker's Nursery became able to print prices on labels. Brian saw it as a time and labor-saving service he could provide to his customers. But they didn't all see it that way.

"I said to people, 'How would you like it if we could put your retail price on your labels so you wouldn't be sitting out there bent over with a magic marker?' And you know what they said? 'Well, then you're going to know how much our markup is.'"

"You know what?" Brian replied. "I hope you make a million dollars selling my plants, because if you do, you're going to come back and buy some more. I don't care what your markup is; why are you afraid of that?"

The hesitation shown by his retailer partners perplexed Brian. Still, Decker's Nursery has continued to be forward-thinking in its relationships with independent garden center customers. In 2017, the nursery became a grower member of Bower & Branch. For Decker's, the part-

nership is a way to reach web-savvy retail customers through Bower & Branch's online presence. Purchases are fulfilled by growers like Decker's and buyers have the choice to pick them up at a local IGC or have them delivered.

## Early adopter

Brian is one of the American nursery industry's foremost "early adopters." Decker's Nursery is known for embracing technology, from innovative uses of automation in plant spacing, trimming, shipping and more, to installing solar panel systems on the roof of its propagation barn.

History has shown that it can be painful to be first. Early adopters have to fight through issues as new products aren't always ready for prime time when they hit the market. There are usually bugs to be ironed out and it falls on the early adopters to report them so the product can be improved in its next iteration. A new system may not work as designed, especially once it's being tested in a "real world" nursery environment with all the dirt, rain and gravel that entails. Typically, in solving one problem, two more may pop up.

Brian dealt with the growing pains of adapting forklifts mounted on motorized trikes to move containers around the nursery. He believed using a pot forks system to handle large quantities of container plants would be beneficial, so he reconfigured everything in his nursery around the use of these trikes, from adjusting openings to hoop houses to allow clearance for the vehicles, to installing irrigation lines that can safely be driven over.

"When he said, 'We're going to build greenhouses you can drive through' ... Holy Moses, what an idea!" Decker's CEO Mike Miller says.

Even then, Brian had to figure out how to get the fork attachments and the container lips to play well together. It required a ton of trial and error, extra fabricating work and plenty of back-and-forth with container design partners regarding sizes and shapes. And yet, he soldiered on because he believed in the system and what it could do for his nursery.

"This industry is not for cowards or the faint of heart," Brian says. "You have

to go with your gut sometimes and not all accounting data. Large investments often can have unexpected 'collateral' benefits. These make black-and-white decisions a rare thing in moving forward. I am also pleased our CEO, Mike Miller, having completed the EAGL program with Charlie Hall, has refined some financial skills to help us see the financial side of these decision more clearly. Combine a clear financial analysis with a fearless desire to succeed and you have a potent combination."

## Sharing what he's learned

As a fellow, past president (2016) and member of the board of directors since 2014 of the IPPS Eastern Region, it should be no surprise that Brian truly exemplifies the IPPS motto: "To seek and to share." That spirit is especially important when he shares what he's learned as an early adopter of technology. He often crafts presentations and gives talks to peers in the industry. As an example, once he'd cracked the code on pot design requirements and fork unit configurations, he shared that information during talks at industry meetings, virtual conferences and more. He doesn't hesitate to discuss any implements his team created or processes they've designed to make production more efficient. Beyond that, he will share the ROI and cost savings of a project or the

nursery design requirements that would be necessary to make it work.

Decker's Nursery extends its sharing to the next generation of horticulture, as well. Each year, the nursery hosts field trips from seven universities. Brian has provided videos showing plant propagation and grafting to these universities at no cost. He also has offered paid internships to dozens of American horticulture students, as well as sponsoring more than a dozen paid one-year International Horticultural Internships through Ohio State University.

Mike Miller took a job at Decker's Nursery right out of OSU's horticulture program. He was 22, a farm kid who wasn't sure what he wanted to do, but knew he wanted to be in wholesale, not retail. "I liked production, not people," he laughs.

Brian's drive to educate helped Mike get his start.

"I graduated with lots of knowledge from courses and books, but I didn't know anything," Mike says.

Mike stuck around and learned how to grow plants in the real world. Now, he is Decker's CEO and an important part of the company's succession plan.

"Brian enjoys showing and teaching people and the industry how we do things," Mike says. "It's not just info, he shares on a personal level."



## BRIAN DECKER

His candor is refreshing. Brian has always been incredibly open to explaining how something works or why it doesn't.

"I have learned more from my failures than successes," Brian says. "Do not be afraid to fail, just be afraid to not try. The industry is consolidating and evolving. We need to stay in the position of lead sled dog or our view will never change. Current problems with labor, political environment, and market evolution make this a challenge. Someone will succeed, but I guarantee you it will not be the folks too afraid to consider new ways of operating."

### Keeping your workforce happy

When you see a worker at Decker's maneuvering a trike with its forklift fully loaded with containers through one of the older hoop houses on the property, skillfully weaving back and forth to avoid structural support poles, you understand the amount of training that employee had to have.

That's why Decker's Nursery approaches H-2A differently than many growers that use the government-run seasonal worker program. Brian and special projects director Pam Dukes, who (among many other tasks) manages all things H-2A at Decker's, aim to provide outstanding living conditions for their seasonal workers. Instead of cramming multiple workers into dormitories, barracks-style, Decker's gives each worker their own bedroom. The housing units at Decker's have five bedrooms, a kitchen and common area — downright spacious in comparison. There is a waiting list 10 people deep to work at Decker's Nursery and that's exactly how Brian likes it.

"When you see the level of mechanization on some of the things we do around here, you say 'I don't want to retrain all these people,'" Brian says. "So everybody thinks I'm a big generous guy providing this wonderful kind of environment for these people with the barbecue grills and this and that. But it's so that people want to come back."

And it works. When Brian sees one of his extremely skilled forklift operators get off the bus March 1 and go straight to their bedroom, from which they didn't

even take their clothes home for the winter, he knows the investment is worth it. Every H-2A employee is a returnee. The only workers who don't come back are the ones who aren't asked back.

The workers appreciate how good they have it. They understand how the conditions differ from other options. They love the privacy of their own rooms and the fact that if they ask their boss for a pool table, they'll have one the very next day.

"On Sundays, there's a fiesta kind of atmosphere there," he says. "You've got 15-20 people over here grilling out and drinking beer and playing pool and foosball and watching soccer from home on the big screen TV. I wanted them to have a 'man cave' to be able to relax a little bit since they're away from their families for 10 months."

Brian recognizes that this is a very different way of approaching H-2A. When he looks at his gross sales, profitability and remembers how he grew up thinking, "there's no way I could ever pay anybody over \$6/hour," it puts into stark relief how much the industry has changed. Growers who want to survive have to adapt with it. Decker's Nursery grew revenue 48% during the last two years — the COVID years — as many big nurseries did.

"When you look at H-2A, yes, it's expensive," he says. "But what's the alternative? Local workers — you go through 100 to get one. If you want to expand your business, you need to fill those roles. Could it be better? Definitely. But you need it to have enough people. If you don't have the things you need to have, your return on investment doesn't matter."

### The value of your reputation

Brian appreciates everything he learned in his family's business. But in growing up and moving past the influences of his youth, he had to unlearn some outdated business practices that he assumed were valid. Although he's changed the way he produces plants many times, he still adheres to the principles handed down to him by his father for maintaining relationships with vendors and customers. Growing the business to what it is today, while still maintaining the respect of others in

the industry, has been fulfilling for him.

"I have no worry about anyone accusing our company of anything dishonest," he says. "This is very important to me; doing business with integrity and grace."

That carefully cultivated reputation has presented him with business opportunities many times. And when he sees a business opportunity that he believes could be excellent, he jumps in with both feet.

Several years ago, before the blight-resistant Saunders Genetics-developed NewGen boxwood was introduced, Bennett Saunders (fellow HILA class of 2022 recipient) sought out Brian at Cultivate. Because of Decker's reputation in the industry, Bennett wanted to see the operation in person. Brian hosted several of the brothers and their wives on their way home to Virginia from the Columbus, Ohio, trade show. They were impressed by Decker's liner production, and they could see the skills they'd heard about were not exaggerated. They talked about the blight-resistant boxwood they'd been developing and wondered if Brian would come to their Virginia nursery to see it. Brian said, "How's Monday?" This was on a Friday. The brothers justifiably wanted an extra day to prepare, and Brian was sitting at their office at 7 a.m. Tuesday. While he was there, Brian met Paul Saunders, the brothers' father and patriarch of the nursery. Paul, who passed away in March, shared old IPPS stories with Brian.

"Before I left that day, they had put six or 10 3-gallon boxwoods in the back of my pickup truck without us even having a single signed contract," Brian says.

Brian knew he needed to move quickly if he was going to ramp up production. Propagation ends Aug. 1 and it was already mid-July. Time was of the essence.

He sterilized a truck and sent it to pick up a full load of Freedom and Independence, the NewGen introductions, from Saunders Brothers right away, so it could make the return trip to Groveport and quarantine in accordance with boxwood blight safety protocols. Once those plants were out of quarantine, Decker's crew made 25,000 cuttings and it was off to the races. It took a few more months for the paperwork to catch up, but neither side



In May, Decker's was expanding its greenhouse production, going from 10 to 16 greenhouse bays. The \$1.2 million construction project leaves room for five more bays in the future.

As Decker's Nursery moves into the next generation of leadership, it will continue to be known nationally as a propagation specialist and new plant introduction source, for e-commerce fulfillment through Bower & Branch, and for finished container production for its regional market.

Brian has three children, all of whom have their own career paths outside of horticulture. With the help of his attorney, he developed an extremely thorough and unorthodox succession plan.

It came about from asking a few important questions. Are your key employees loyal to the point that you would consider them family? If you consider those key staff members family, would you treat them like heirs? If the answer to this question is yes, trust and reward them as family. If the answer is no, change them out for more qualified leadership.

Brian developed a plan to transfer ownership of his nursery to a "core four" group of key employees. (*Editor's note:* For a more detailed look at the plan, visit: <https://bit.ly/decker-succession>.)

"I am amazed at the very high level of performance from our new minority owners since the succession plan was imple-

mented," Brian says. "I have stopped making 98% of the decisions ... not needed. It is better for the new leadership to make the decisions and the mistakes."

As his core four take on more responsibilities, Brian is transitioning to working part-time when needed. This year, he took two vacations in spring — previously inconceivable, but made possible through the new ownership plan. He wants to travel more with his wife, Pat, and visit his kids and grandkids. He still plans to participate in industry leadership and mentoring through HRL, IPPS and other activities that steer youth toward horticulture.

"He's a very lead-from-the-front, tip-of-the-spear type of leader," Mike says. "My first day, he was the one driving the tractor. He's the one setting the 7:30 a.m. meetings, but he's also the one who cooks lunch for everyone after the big propagation push. Or a pig roast after spring rush."

Despite his success as a leader, Brian hasn't lost his touch. He keeps the skills sharp that helped bring him so far.

"Brian is unique in that, as a business owner, he still does what he enjoys and is good at within his business — such as joining the grafting crew each winter," Alan Jones says. "He enjoys grafting much more than attending winter trade shows. But how intimidating must that be for the other grafters to have your boss sitting with you for a couple of months? I'm told Brian makes it a lot of fun, as long as you can graft as fast as he can."

was worried about it.

"They knew our reputation and we knew their reputation," Brian says. "Because of our skills in propagation and our ability to convince people that we're the place to go for something like NewGen boxwood or Proven Winners plants — we're the partner you want to have — because of that skillset, we get the opportunities."

### Looking forward

Decker's Nursery has been transitioning away from B&B growing for years. Five years ago, you could see rows and rows of shade trees in production. But it takes three or four years to grow a 2-inch tree from a liner. If prices are good when it reaches salable size, you can sell it for \$150-\$200.

Compare that to the cuttings of New Gen boxwood that fill Decker's greenhouse bays. Just one of those trays holds 50 plants. Each plant sells for \$2.30. That means each tray is about \$115. Decker's is able to turn them in nine months.

"I probably have more money sitting in that quadrant right there than I might have in 25 acres of trees," Brian says, gesturing at one of the many bays filled with trays holding tiny boxwood plants.

"And it's a whole lot easier to pick that up than it is to pick up a 2-inch caliper B&B tree."

# a legacy BY THE SEA

Ron Caird cultivates a 50-year legacy of growth at Por La Mar Nursery.

BY BROOKE BILYJ

**W**hen Ronald Caird and his wife, Patricia, started growing flowers in 1972, they didn't realize they were planting the seeds for a company that would one day span three generations. Celebrating 50 years in business this year, Por La Mar Nursery has grown into more than just a thriving wholesale operation — it's a rich family legacy that's cultivating future horticulture leaders to follow in Ron's footsteps.

"To start with, it wasn't thought to be a 50-year company," says Ron's daughter, Erin Caird, who serves as the company's sales and marketing director. "It was grown out of passion."

Ron's passion for plants has since influenced countless other horticulture careers — most notably within his own family. With his son, Brian, now serving as president, daughter Erin overseeing sales and marketing, and three grandchildren currently in the company, Por La Mar is "really embracing the next generations," Erin says.

Here's how Ron is grooming future leaders at

Por La Mar to carry on his tradition of growing.

## **Rooted in horticulture**

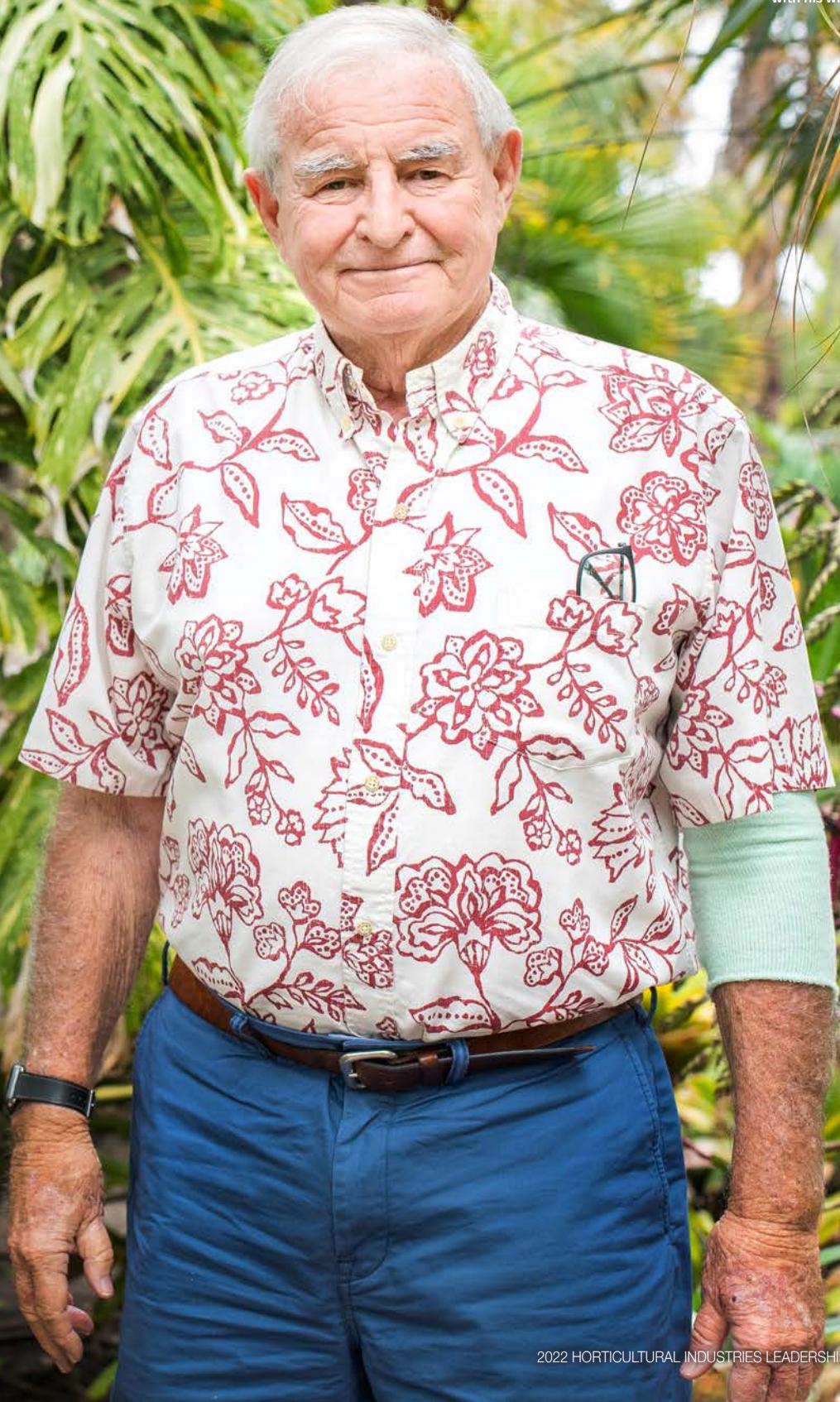
The Caird family's roots in Southern California date back more than a century. Ron's father — a Scottish immigrant who spent several years fighting in the trenches during World War I — arrived in Los Angeles in 1919 and began working as an estate gardener. The next year, Pat's family arrived in Santa Barbara, where her father started a landscaping career.

As the first generation born in America, Ron grew up pursuing his parent's values of perseverance and opportunity. "What comes with [being a first generation American] is hard work," he says.

Ron grew up on a Hollywood estate where his father worked as head gardener for 35 years. Surrounded by celebrities, their next-door neighbor was Ricky Nelson, the former child star who appeared with his family in the radio and television series, "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet." From a young age, Ron followed his

POR LA MAR NURSERY

Ron Caird founded Por La Mar Nursery in 1972 with his wife, Patricia.





Ron got his first taste of horticulture walking with his father, who worked as head gardener on a Hollywood estate for 35 years.

father around the garden, trimming hedges and tending to plants. “That was where I got my beginnings in horticulture,” he says.

When the owner of the estate died in 1959, the Cairds moved to Santa Barbara. Ron started taking horticulture courses in high school while expanding his experience through a variety of jobs.

“During high school, I worked for my future father-in-law, who had a tree and landscaping business here in Santa Barbara [called Griffin Tree and Landscape],” Ron says. “I also worked for a large orchid grower called Gallop & Stribling. I was their first employee.”

After graduating high school in 1961, Ron enrolled in the ornamental horticulture program at Cal Poly San Luis

Obispo. While getting his education, Ron also found time for his other hobbies, too. “I was a big surfer at the time,” he says. “I spent a lot of time in the water, and went to Hawaii and did some big wave riding for a while.”

Driven by his love of the great outdoors, Ron explored various facets of the horticulture industry after finishing his degree. His first job out of college was working at Mistletoe Sales, a wholesale seed company. “We would travel up and down the state of California collecting tree and shrub seeds, from the Mexican border to Oregon,” he says. “That gave me a real depth of knowledge in plant material.”

### **Cultivating the American Dream**

In the late ‘60s, after a few years in the seed side of the busi-

Ron and Pat bought a 6-acre nursery near Santa Barbara in 1972 as part of his quest “to have a piece of ground.”



ness, Ron returned to his father-in-law’s landscaping company, where he worked for over 20 years. Like his father before him, Ron worked for wealthy clients like Madame Ganna Walska, a Polish opera singer known for the extravagant gardens she designed at her estate called Lotusland, which Ron’s father-in-law had tended since 1948.

“She would run around town buying plant material, and then we would dig them up and plant them back in her estate,” Ron remembers. The first job he did for her was digging up a big *Cycas circinalis* (queen sago palm) to replant at Lotusland. The company also provided tree care, irrigation work, garden clean-ups, “and dealing with the lotus ponds” on the property, he says.

Madame Walska wanted her garden to feature the biggest, best, most unusual specimens — and according to the Lotusland website, she often paid any price to get them. Over the years, Ron helped the “diva” establish what he calls “one of the finest collections of bromeliads in the world.” In the 1970s, Walska famously auctioned off some of her prized jewelry to finance a collection of cycads, which Ron ranks third or fourth in the world thanks to her impressive trio of *Encephalartos woodii*, an incredibly rare specimen that’s extinct in the wild.

The years he spent cultivating gardens stoked Ron’s first-generation quest for The American Dream: which

was, in his words, “to have a piece of ground.” With that ambition, in 1972, Ron and Pat purchased a 6-acre nursery nestled near the coast in Santa Barbara. Under the name Por La Mar Nursery, which is Spanish for “by the sea,” they began growing *Asparagus retrofractus* (Ming asparagus fern) and *Gypsophila* (baby’s breath) to sell at the Los Angeles Flower Market as bouquet foliage.

Still juggling both jobs — landscaping through his father-in-law’s company while launching the nursery — Ron needed help keeping up with the growth. Within a couple of years, he hired a production manager, Dan Jauchen, who still works at the company today. They started building more greenhouses and adding more varieties to Por La Mar’s mix, as the operation steadily grew.

### Exploring new varieties

The diversity of Por La Mar’s plant mix expanded through the years as Ron and Pat traveled the globe in search of new varieties. From the tropics all the way to his parents’ respective hometowns in England and Scotland, Ron got to see the world through horticulture.

“My favorite trips [were] always to Denmark or Holland,” Ron says. “We had a lot of Danish and Dutch employees here, especially when we were growing

## RON CAIRD

tremendous amounts of bulbs, so that was always good to meet with those [growers].”

After starting out with a focus on foliage, Por La Mar blossomed into flowering potted plant production over the years — growing calla lilies, hydrangeas, zygocactus and roses. “At one time, we were very large rose growers,” Ron says. “We’ve done almost every breed that you can think about, and now we’ve bred our line of roses [for our] Mediterranean climate.”

In 2004, Ron purchased Glad-A-Way-Gardens in Santa Maria. Known for its extensive gladiolus hybridization program, the acquisition added several hundred acres of outdoor glad production to expand the family business.

By taking risks to explore and breed new plant material, Ron guided the company as consumer plant-buying patterns shifted. As recently as 2020, Por La Mar was predominantly growing flowering plants — until Ron saw the market evolving again and jumped back into foliage with a heavy focus on houseplants.

Now, looking back on the market trends Ron has navigated, his second- and third-generation successors still see his risks paying off.

“Part of what makes him a great leader is that he’s bold and he’s a risk taker,” says Aidan Williams, Ron’s grandson, who’s now sales and operations manager at Por La Mar. “He saw how the market and consumer trends were changing, and he took a risk. Two years ago, we were a blooming dominant company, and he flipped the entire business; now we’re [mostly] foliage. It’s led us to have the highest sales we’ve ever had as a company. In an industry that’s ever-changing, one of the greatest lessons I’ve learned from him is: Don’t be afraid to take risks.”

### **Innovating for growth**

Besides plants, Ron also brought back other methods and ideas from the growers he visited around the globe.

For example, when rose production was taking off in Europe in the late 1980s, Ron and Pat traveled to Holland and Denmark several times to explore conveyor systems, potting machines and new lighting technologies to improve their production back home. “That pushed us pretty fast into new technology,” he says.

Finding more efficient ways to grow has been paramount to Ron’s approach — especially in a location like Santa Barbara, where he says, “land values are going about \$150-200,000 an acre,” and “the average home is about \$1.3 million, all the way up to \$30 million.” High costs of



land and labor, combined with the low margins of wholesale greenhouse production, put extra pressure on Ron to use his resources wisely.

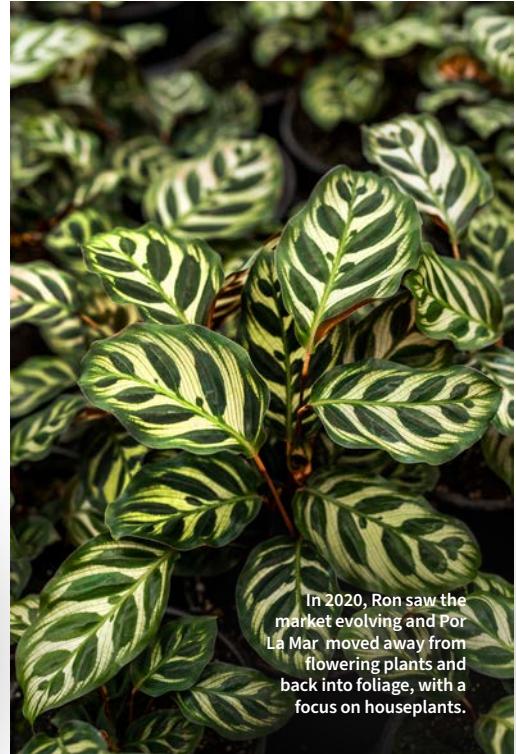
“In a low-margin business, you’ve really got to be watching your numbers and watching your cost analysis,” says Ron, who implemented a Danish cost analysis system many years ago that the company still uses today. “You can’t hope and pray that the price point will take care of it, because it won’t. You’ve got to be innovative. You’ve got to be efficient. And you’d better be looking at your margins very carefully.”

Now, Ron relies on the third generation to bring in new technology to complement his old-school ways. Although the tools may look different today, Aidan says that Ron’s always been “a big proponent of having data drive business decisions.” At the same time, Ron set an example of looking beyond the data to make big decisions by incorporating feedback from the whole team.

“What I’ve always admired is that he has a big picture perspective for the whole company, and he understands how one decision may affect different departments,” Aidan says. “He always views every decision from multiple angles, asking for feedback before moving forward.”



Ron has traveled the world in search of exciting varieties, and uses them to bolster Por La Mar's ever-changing selection of plants.



In 2020, Ron saw the market evolving and Por La Mar moved away from flowering plants and back into foliage, with a focus on houseplants.

### Passing on a legacy

As much as Ron loves plants, there's no doubt that the people in this industry mean more to him than the products.

"It's not all about the plants. It's more about, how do we sustain 200-plus lives [by taking care of our employees] and their families? He really takes that to heart," Erin says. "He loves to share what he knows with the next generations."

For example, when Aidan attended Ron's alma mater, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, to follow in his footsteps by studying horticulture, it triggered a special cross-generational mentorship. "I really bonded with him when I went off to college," Aidan says. "He'd come up for coffee, and we'd talk about school, internships and career momentum. That's where our relationship grew to the next level."

After helping at Por La Mar during summer breaks from school, Aidan gained experience working for another grower before joining the family business about a year ago. While rotating through each department to learn the ropes, Aidan says he learned how vital relationships are to his grandpa's legacy as a nurseryman.

"He has incredible relationships with people, whether it's our suppliers, customers [or employees]," Aidan says. "He'll always be remembered for caring for his people. It's the reason why, out of the 250 people we have here, over 100 have been here 20-plus years. That's [a legacy] I want to carry on."

With an average employee tenure of at least 10 years, Por La Mar's strong family culture is a testament to Ron's compassionate approach to leadership. To this day, Ron continues to lead this team by example. Now age 78, Ron still comes into the nursery every day, calling himself the "chief meddler" as he offers ongoing guidance and support for the second and third generations.

Still active on industry and community boards through the local Chamber of Commerce, Lotusland and Cal Poly, Ron says he'll never officially retire. Even though the company is in good hands, he still has an important role to play as his family leads the nursery into a new era.

"After 50 years of doing this, what else can I give them but wisdom?" Ron says.

*The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*

# *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

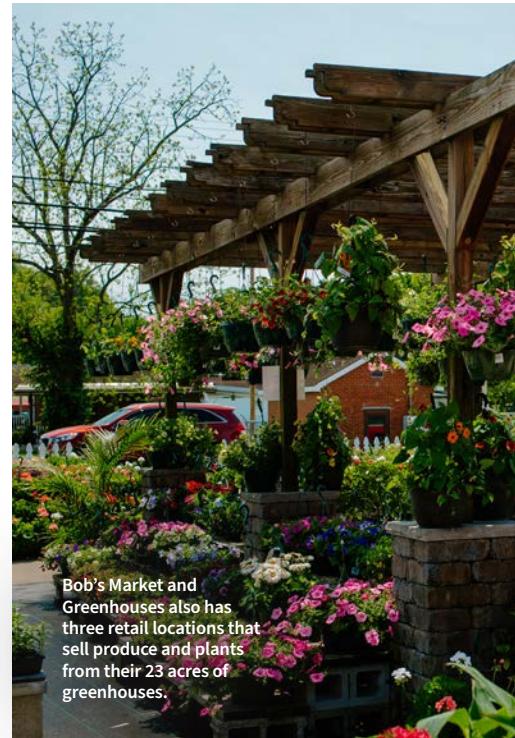
**PRODUCTS:**

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.



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# A mighty MENTOR

*Bridget Behe strives to empower the next generation of horticultural professionals to be fearless and change paradigms within the industry.*

BY DANIELLE ERNEST

It is with great honor I write this article about an absolutely amazing horticultural giant who was my academic advisor and teacher at Michigan State University. Dr. Bridget Behe is the epitome of kindness and respect. She elevates her students to a whole new degree in academia. When we began the interview, she immediately wanted to talk about my life and circumstances outside the horticulture industry before herself. When I tried to push on, she wanted to know about two other events that had happened in my life, as I have been out of the horticulture industry for some time, but she follows me closely on social media. As Stephen Covey states in Bridget's favorite book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," "The most important ingredient we put into any relationship is not what we say or what we do, but what we are."

I asked her which question stood out on a list that I had emailed to her and she immediately gravitated to the question "describe a time when your students made you proud," not "name your biggest accomplishment." This in and of itself says a lot about her character.

As we spoke on the phone, I could hear her voice beam with pride as she spoke about her students. With all her travels around the United States and abroad, she would run into students at different trade shows and educational events where they would be joyous about their reunion and hug her immediately upon seeing her.

"Do you know how meaningful it is

that a previous student would make an effort to say hello and not run the other direction?" Bridget said with a chuckle. "Especially at Cultivate, I would see so many students and they would often share how I have helped them or guided them. It made me feel like I had a small hand in their success and makes me so proud of each of them."

Dr. Melinda Knuth, one of Bridget's former grad students and an assistant professor of Horticultural Science at NC State, had this to say about the "Beloved Behe":

"Bridget's contribution to my personal and professional life has been invaluable. Bridget guided me through much of my doctoral educational skill development by allowing me to take the reins on multiple projects and manuscripts, introducing me to her network connections, coaching me through job interviews and high stakes exams, and more. She invited me as a visiting scholar to Michigan State to collect data together. She has been a mentor, advisor, confidant and friend. I hope to be as good of a mentor to another woman as she has been to me. My life would not be as bright without you, Bridget."

Jessica DeGraaf, a former undergrad and grad student of Bridget's, and director of retail accounts for Proven Winners says Bridget's legacy of mentorship, especially to women, has been exceptionally impactful.

"Michelle Obama so eloquently stated, 'There's no magic to achievement. It's really about hard work, choices and persistence.' Dr. Behe truly exemplifies this statement.

Her passion, dedication and hard work are second to none. What truly sets her apart is not solely the body of her accomplishments, but her impact on thousands of students and the industry," Jessica says. "Her legacy far surpasses her achievements in the field of horticulture. She has graciously shared of her time and talents to mentor many women, myself included. Her impact and investment in my career have been monumental. She has been a sounding board, confidant and cheerleader, and I owe much of who I am as a person and professional to her."

Bridget epitomizes the term trailblazer. Throughout her career, she's worked tirelessly to bring another perspective and share critical research on connecting and truly engaging with the consumer. While new plants and propagation techniques are critical to success for growers and retailers in our industry, what truly matters is the connection point to the end consumer — what drives them and their purchase decision.

"For more than 30 years, Dr. Behe has brought this unique perspective and, along the way, has revolutionized how garden centers sell plants," Jessica says.

The eye-tracking studies Bridget and her team have undertaken have helped a lot of professionals, and not just in horticulture, understand how consumers choose a plant.

"We know much more about how they shop, the information they use to make a plant choice and what some key motivations are. I love investigating this



Bridget Behe's eye-tracking studies have helped a lot of professionals, and not just in horticulture, understand how consumers choose a plant.

## BRIDGET BEHE

key moment for the industry. It is the make-or-break moment for everyone. I'm thrilled to have contributed to making that moment better for buyers and sellers," Bridget says.

Her gaze-path research has identified ways to present point-of-sale information to consumers to encourage engagement and purchasing of plants, says Alicia Rihn, assistant professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Tennessee.

"Bridget is an amazing colleague, mentor and friend. She always advocates for the green industry to promote the positive components of their firms, whether it is the services, products or amazing people," Alicia says. "Additionally, she has been instrumental in guiding young industry and academic professionals as they determine their own career goals and aspirations. She is always available to talk, brainstorm and strategize about next steps to achieve personal and professional goals."

The green industry has been able to better understand and capitalize on consumer behavior, thanks to her efforts, says Dr. Charlie Hall, professor and Ellison Chair in the Department of Horticultural Sciences at Texas A&M University.

"She has been a pioneer in utilizing novel market research tools to ascertain the mind of the consumer — Servqual, conjoint analyses, experimental auctions, eye tracking — just to name a few. And she has passed on her skill set to numerous graduate students who have gone on to make a difference in the industry and academia in their own circles of influence. But perhaps the very best thing I can say about Bridget is she is my friend and one of my heroes. My life, and countless lives in the industry, have been enriched by her dedication to her craft, and her heart for knowing the unknown."

### A look back

Bridget loves science and, as a young girl, wanted to be a surgeon. In her undergraduate days, she saw her peers and "those students on a medical path who didn't seem to want to have a life, family or pursue anything other than medicine. That was my cue to find an alternative career path. Hor-



ticulture satisfied the scientist in me, and I could see myself with a career and a family," Bridget acknowledges. The daughter of a psychologist father and mother who was a nurse, she was discouraged from going into education. Yet, she felt teaching in higher education as a calling from God more than a deliberate career path.

"Everyone looks at a flower and smiles," she says. "We enrich people's lives with the products that we sell. We work in the best industry on earth."

Bridget was the first woman in her family to go to college. Her greatest mentors were her grandmothers, Esther M. Sheridan and Ann O. Behe as well as her mother Claire Jean Behe. Her parents and grandmothers taught her that "from the neck up, we are all the same, and with a solid education, you can achieve great success."

Both of Bridget's grandmothers were her horticultural inspirations. Her maternal grandmother (Esther M. Sheridan) was a tester for Jackson & Perkins roses. Esther loved her flower garden and created a beautiful one about ½ acre in size. She and Bridget would spend hours in the garden during Bridget's college breaks, talking about flowers and plants, and enjoying time together. Her paternal grandmother (Ann O. Behe) had an amazing vegetable garden and she and Bridget would spend some time talking about vegetables and enjoying the bounty. For Bridget, seeing horticulture from the edible and ornamental sides of the spectrum influenced her deeply. Her mother helped Bridget and her immediate family of five to earn 10 college degrees, but she didn't pursue one of her own, despite

the family's encouragement.

"Mom was an excellent editor and helped me, my brother and sister to become better writers. She often told me how proud of me she was and that fueled my determination to be successful in the classroom and in my work," she lovingly recalls.

If Bridget could give her younger self some advice, she'd tell her to "be more fearless and push back when people say or do inappropriate things."

### Bridging the gap

She got more serious about our conversation, sad at the lack of progress industry professionals have made in eliminating all types of discrimination in academia and industry. She's a proud supporter of the "Women in Horticulture" event that will take place for the third time this year at Cultivate. This massive event and several others are fantastic ways for students and new professionals to instantly connect with horticultural mentors and powerhouses, like Bridget.

"I first met Dr. Bridget Behe when she joined the Horticulture Department at Michigan State University. I was reaching the end of my graduate program at the time, so I unfortunately didn't have the opportunity to work directly with her as a student. But with her office just down the hall from mine, we crossed paths regularly and inevitably hit it off," recalls Leslie Halleck, horticulture consultant and owner of Halleck Horticultural. "She was always supportive and encouraging, and always willing to talk even though I technically wasn't one of her grad students. I still wish

I'd had the privilege of having her on my graduate committee. I left MSU in 1998, but in the years since, she and I have always stayed in touch, developing a growing bond rooted in professional respect and personal admiration. Her innovative and tech-savvy marketing research has provided valuable insights for retailers across the country. I consider Dr. Behe to be not only one of the smartest and dedicated horticulture industry professionals, but also a key role model for and supporter of women in horticulture. More importantly, I consider Bridget my friend and ally."

Megan Nace, senior manager of Education Program Development at AmericanHort, appreciates Bridget's gift of building people up.

"She should have a novel written about her and the amazing work she has done and is doing for her students, her community, and the horticulture industry. Dr. Behe is sincere and professional. She has an innate ability to take a small idea or thought and amplify it — and never takes credit for it, as she wants those around her to shine," Megan says. "She is honest and always looking for ways to build up those around her; whether it is the research/academic community, someone she just met or her students. Retailers, students, academia and the horticulture industry as a whole is beyond lucky to have such a true professional in our corner."

Bridget is a member of the Garden Retail Community Connector group and

supports the AmericanHort's work, especially in the retail sector. She has influenced many in our industry as she meets with the incoming HortScholar class each year and advocates for her students as they enter the green industry.

Bridget says the biggest challenge that our industry faces today isn't how to reach a younger demographic. It's how to keep the younger demographic working in our industry.

"Over my 33 years in the industry, I have seen smart, driven professionals leave the industry because the culture in several companies they worked for wasn't conducive to their growth. Our biggest hurdle as an industry is to become better individuals, evolve in our professional relationships, and understand that the words we use have power over people," she says. "The most important conversation each of us has is what we say to ourselves. We need to be fearless in our personal missions and coach ourselves to success. And if someone says or does something that makes you uncomfortable or you profoundly dislike, you need to speak up. If not, they think that was okay to do and you know they will do it again."

### Industry connections

"One of the best ways to educate our hearts is to look at our interactions with other people, because our relationships with others are fundamentally a reflection of our relationship with ourselves," Stephen Covey, Bridget's favorite author, writes in his book "First Things First."

Bridget makes it her personal mission to get to know her students and industry professionals — both from academia and the trade — and has developed longstanding relationships with industry pioneers.

"I have known Dr. Bridget Behe for well over 25 years, and in that time, I am honored to be considered a friend as well as an industry co-hort," says John Gaydos, director of product development and promotions at Proven Winners. "Proven Winners and I look to Bridget for guidance and counsel for all things related to new product development, product life cycles, product packaging, and consumer trends as they relate to marketing. She has had a steadfast focus on the products that we produce and the relationship of buying consumer with those products. She has always pursued consumer/product interaction with a keen eye toward the gardener's perceived value and how that relates to profitability for all that are involved with putting that product into the consumer's hands."

As Stephen Covey so eloquently stated, "Paradigms are powerful because they create the lens through which we see the world." Dr. Bridget Behe has created a powerful lens for us all to see the world and the horticulture industry differently than we did years, even months, ago.

*Danielle Ernest is the founder and owner of Flora & Fauna Media, a boutique public relations and marketing firm specializing in horticultural products. She previously worked for Proven Winners and Spring Meadow Nursery. Her writing and photography have been featured in several consumer and trade publications.*



Horticulture satisfied the scientist in Bridget and allowed her to have a life outside of a career.





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