

THE BIG



2015

Taking chances isn't easy. Putting your faith into something new, whether it be entering an emerging market, growing unique varieties, investing in automated equipment or sticking with an environmentally friendly method (even if it costs more) can leave room for error, for losses or even failure. But our 2015 Big 10 growers have taken the leap anyway in hopes of bettering their operations and serving their customers the best they can. And these Big 10 have done so by their employees and customers first, who in turn have supported them through the good and bad times.

In the following pages, we present growers from California to Canada to New Jersey who have taken chances and show that sometimes, as long as you're doing what you enjoy and believe in, making that jump is the right call.

CONTENTS

- 28 **America's Best Flowers**
Cottage Grove, Wisconsin
- 30 **American Color, Inc.**
Orange, Virginia
- 32 **Bob's Market & Greenhouses, Inc.**
Ohio/West Virginia/Georgia
- 34 **Casertano Greenhouses & Farms**
Cheshire, Connecticut
- 36 **Catoctin Mountain Growers**
Detour, Maryland
- 38 **Center Greenhouse**
Denver, Colorado
- 40 **Dallas Johnson Greenhouses**
Council Bluffs, Iowa
- 40 **Matsui Nursery**
California/New Jersey
- 42 **Rosa Flora**
Dunnville, Ontario
- 43 **Sunbelt Greenhouses**
Georgia/Michigan

Evolving with the customer

As customer needs have changed, so have Sunbelt Greenhouses' production methods.

If there is one word that could describe Georgia-based Sunbelt Greenhouses, it would be diversity.

A major grower for independent garden centers, Sunbelt Greenhouses service both small and large accounts throughout the Southeast. It is their experience as a rooting station for several companies including Ball Horticultural, Selecta, Syngenta and non-patented materials that exposes the business to a large range of plant materials. One of the main advantages of being a rooting station is that they are the first to see the new genetics, says Kevin Koepler, general manager of Sunbelt Greenhouses.

Sunbelt Greenhouses prides itself on staying ahead of the

curve, as current owner, Lisa Ambrosio and her husband Andy Ambrosio implement both technological and business changes that fosters continued advancement.

"I think that the change in operation from Lawrence Wenke to his daughter Lisa Ambrosio has given us a lot more insight into technology and what it can provide for us. It has given us production strength," Koepler says. "She and her husband, Andy, have guided us in being able to produce the products that we need for our customers, try to reduce our shrink, and raise our opportunities through all the seasons. It's been a really positive influence to our companies down here as well as the

companies back in Michigan."

As the needs of the customer evolve, so does the Ambrosio's business. One of the biggest changes in the last 15 years has been the shift from flats to container production. "We are seeing flat sales retreat every year, and we are seeing the home owner either buy a finished container or buy the components to make the container for their decks and porches," Koepler says.

To respond to this transition, the delivery process needed to change. Traditionally, products were shipped using the old steel flats that went into a trailer. These flats were then off-loaded by hand. This was an extremely time-consuming, labor-intensive

process. Today, the business has converted to rolling racks that can roll containers right onto the customer's doorstep, providing an efficient solution for transporting containers.

Perhaps the most revolutionary change in Sunbelt Greenhouses' growing operation occurred about four years ago. In the past, they used a conveyor system to make the products. The problem was that this limited the ability to transport products throughout the operation. To resolve this challenge, they fully paved the complex, and replaced traditional equipment such as tractors, trailers and heavy equipment with electric pack mules and carts.

Sunbelt's greenhouse software system, Picas, has played a significant role in increasing overall productivity. This system ensures that all products from the smallest seed to the finished product are fully accounted for. "[Picas] manages our inventory, our production, our receivables, our payables, it controls everything," Koepler says.

One of the new things that they will be using their Picas system for is to track, sort and add the retail pricing for each individual client. Right now, Koepler is using the product on a trial basis, but he is looking forward to being able to provide customers a product that is delivered with the customer's retail pricing.

— Anne-Marie Hardie



FAST FACTS

Year founded: 1983

Locations: Kalamazoo, Mich. and Douglas, Ga.

Owner: Lisa Ambrosio

Acres under cover: 20 acres

Best selling crop: Mixed containers

Website: www.sunbeltgreenhouses.com