

SHINING

Bright

Four Star Greenhouse continues to shine bright while helping consumers and its customers achieve success.

BY TIM HODSON

Like many other growers in the industry, Tom Smith thinks he has one of the greatest jobs in the world.

When he tells people he makes his living by growing and selling plants and brightening people's lives, they usually respond with something like, "Really? That's cool!"

And his response to them is an emphatic, "Yes, it is!"

That is something Smith has thrived on for nearly 40 years ... making a difference with plants whether it is for consumers or his retail, grower and landscape customers.

Smith is the founder and president of Four Star Greenhouse in Carleton, Michigan. Big Grower paid a visit to Four Star last month during the 2016 Michigan Garden Plant Tour to learn more about how the company got to where it is today and where it is headed.

PLANTING THE INITIAL SEED

Smith grew up in the industry and is a third-generation horticulturist. Four Star got its start back in 1977 when it was known as Smith's Greenhouse and focused mainly on growing finished bedding plant crops from seed that were then sold at market.

In 1982, Smith's Greenhouse evolved into Four Star Greenhouse. Smith, along with his wife, Sharon, founded the new company and expanded its product offerings by producing young plants to sell to other growers.

Back then, Four Star's growing operations encompassed about 60,000 square feet. The company currently has approximately 1.4 million square feet of production space.

Smith says in the beginning they really didn't think about getting into the plug business, but "one day we realized we could sell as many young plants as we did retail-ready products, so it just made sense."

Toward the end of the 1980s, Four Star began growing New Guinea impatiens that were bred by Ludwig Kientzler in Germany. Smith says he and Kientzler "hit it off right away" and they developed a business relationship to bring new genetics to the United States from Europe.



FOUR STAR GREENHOUSE AT A GLANCE:

Year Founded:
1982

Locations:
Two facilities in Carleton, Michigan

Key Personnel:
Tom Smith, owner and president; Sharon Smith, owner and vice president; Daryl Pichan, managing director; Jeff Back, director of greenhouse operations; Dennis Crum, director of growing operations; Susan Maliszewski, director of sales and marketing; Mark Multer, director of finance; and Curt Varsogea, sales manager

Total Growing Space:
27 acres under cover and 4 acres of outdoor production

Number of Employees:
312 (152 full-time and 160 seasonal)

Annual Production:
50 million liners and 500,000 retail-ready units for customers in all 50 states, Bermuda and Canada

Website:
www.pwfourstar.com

Smith says as genetics kept improving he was always adding new varieties. "My focus was to always bring consumers the best genetics we could for their success." To do that, he traveled around Europe searching for new and unique vegetative annuals that could be grown in the United States.

That relationship continued to evolve and in 1992, Four Star, along with EuroAmerican Propagators in California and Pleasant View Gardens in New Hampshire, created the Proven Winners cooperative.

Smith says one of the goals of their new company was to "place a new emphasis on garden performance and a plant brand in the horticulture industry, as growers began to adjust their business and operating practices to grow vegetatively."

Today, Proven Winners' founding members continue to develop and market their brand to consumers as well as other growers, retailers and landscapers. The company added Spring Meadows Nursery's shrub line in 2004 and perennials from Walters Gardens in 2011.

SUCCESS STARTS IN THE GREENHOUSE

According to Smith, much of Four Star's success can be attributed to the fact that they always keep the consumer in mind when developing and producing products.

"There are too many people out there producing plants that only have the grower in mind and, ultimately, not the consumer," he remarks. "They do not have the experience of both selecting and growing with the end consumer in mind ... we understand the importance of trying to make it look good in the greenhouse for retail-ready sales but also perform well in the consumer's garden."

And that all begins in Four Star's 27+ acres of greenhouses located in Carleton, about 30 miles southwest of Detroit.

Dennis Crum, the company's director of growing operations, says the consumer's success is cultivated in Four Star's greenhouses. Advanced technology and a clean growing environment are prevalent throughout the company.

Crum says technology is one of the key ingredients for growing "healthy and happy plants." The extensive use of things like environmental controls, flood floors, thrips screening, stringent sanitation protocols, bio-controls, logistics systems, and labor and product tracking all contribute to the quality of the plants and ultimately the consumer's success.

"Like other growers, we have environmental control systems, but we probably use them more than other growers," Crum says. "Or we use them where other growers don't. In propagation. On hanging baskets. In liner production and more."

Crum and his team take great pride in the cleanliness of their greenhouses. He says it is so vital to a plant's health and helps them produce better plants. "We are big on sanitation. The greenhouses are cleaned and disinfected regularly (daily, at the start of each season and once a crop finishes) and we have our industrial floor scrubbers that keep the floors shining at all times," he says.

Crum adds when visitors see their greenhouses they always make comments like, "You could eat off of the floors they are so clean." But, Crum adds not only is it good

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for the plants, it also makes for a much more pleasant workplace for the employees.

Scouting for diseases, weeds and pests is another major priority. "Plants get viruses just like people do," Smith says. "The key is to verify, identify and clean up the issue as quickly as possible."

Four Star's full-time IPM coordinator roams the greenhouses looking for potential problems and applying the appropriate treatments to keep pests in check.

The company is also doing a lot with bio-controls to manage greenhouse pests. "It has been a learning process for us," Crum says. "But we are working them into our system" and finding the right mix of products to keep pest problems to a minimum. Crum says the company also is no longer using neonicotinoids on their young plants or finished product.

Another significant investment in technology will be arriving in Carleton next month. "We just purchased two robot sticking machines from the ISO Group that should be installed in late October. We are excited to get those installed," Smith says.

He adds that they have built their logistics system to be expandable so they could add more of the sticking machines in the future.

Crum says the company is constantly evaluating new technologies to find better and more efficient ways to produce plants. But "if the numbers don't make sense for us when I put pencil to paper" then Four Star won't invest in the technology.

"Technology and automation are going to be very key to us to continue to expand and keep up with the brands," Smith declares.

CONSULTATIVE COLLABORATION

Since Four Star produces young plants as well as finished product, they are not only suppliers to their customers but they are also consultants. The company's grower experts have more than 225 years of combined industry experience and they are happy to share their knowledge with their customers.

Crum and his team welcome phone calls and emails from their grower customers seeking advice on the best ways to grow their products. "We are finishing [the same products] side by side with whoever we sell the young plants to. So they can call us up any time and ask us specific questions about specific varieties," Crum says.

One of the biggest challenges many of their customers have, he says, is figuring out the right nutritional requirements for their plants in their



PROVEN GARDEN PERFORMANCE

Each summer, Four Star Greenhouse participates in the Michigan Garden Plant Tour, a coordinated open house of leading young plant producers of ornamentals and Michigan State University.

The Four Star Gardens (www.fourstargardens.com) allow people to "really experience what the plants are all about," Smith says.

It's an opportunity to see how the plants perform in boxes, beds, hanging baskets, upright containers and other formats — and visitors get to see what the plants can and can't do over an entire season. "They really get to experience the garden performance of the plants."

The 1-acre gardens are even available for seasonal rentals for wedding ceremonies, showers, photo sessions and other events.

To learn more about the Four Star Gardens check out the video at <http://bit.do/FourStarGardenVideo>.



own growing conditions. “Most of the problems are [the growers] are using the wrong fertilizer or they have no idea what to use. That is something we can help them with.”

“If we can get a water sample from them, then we can get them the right fertilizer and make their life a whole lot easier.”

Smith says data sharing is also another way that Four Star consults with its customers. “We track a lot of different things,” Smith says, from pay-by-scan information, labor usage or tracking retail-ready sales down to the variety and combination.

This kind of data is very powerful when it comes to making prospective buying and growing decisions. “You can’t improve anything unless you track it,” Smith says.

By sharing sales and production data with retailers and growers, everyone can make informed decisions to help them be more successful in the future.

ON A MISSION

As one of the founding members of the Proven Winners brand, you would expect Four Star’s mission statement to reflect how it produces the brand’s products. “We are very proud of our mission statement,” Smith says. “It is posted in many different places around here for employees to see.”

The mission statement is: Provide the finest and most innovative products and services that make every Proven Winners experience easy, successful and inspiring!

“Everyone that works here is definitely a part of making that mission statement happen,” Smith says.

They are producing the branded products that will help make Four Star’s customers and the end consumers successful.

“We want our customers to embrace our brand and use all of the advantages the brand has to offer,” Smith says. “Look at how consumers buy, they recognize and choose brands. [We can give them] the brand that is going provide the highest sell through from grower bench to retail. The brand may not be the cheapest, but it will make you the most money.”

A friend of Smith’s once told him, “There are three things you can buy. 1. Quality; 2. Service; and 3. Low price. The problem is you can only have two of them and you have to make the decision on which two you want.”

“We are in the decorating and hobby business. Those two things people don’t buy cheap. They want the good stuff!”

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

As the company grows its plants, it is also growing. Currently, Four Star is adding 4.8 acres of new greenhouses that will be used next spring for growing shrubs, perennials and annuals. He says the company also has future plans to build a new production barn “that will take the best advantage of automated technology.”

As Smith approaches his 40th anniversary in the business he still looks forward to getting up each morning and going to work. “I love doing what I’m doing. It’s the best industry to be in. There is huge potential for growth because everyone wants what we have. All we have to do is make them successful!” ■



C3 GARDENS
CUSTOM. CREATIVE. COLORFUL.

SUCCESS MADE TO ORDER

Last year, Tom Smith partnered with garden designer Jack Barnwell to create C3 Gardens (www.c3gardens.com), a company that “offers innovative design for seasonal gardens in container collections and garden beds.”

“We know that there are a lot of people who know what they want but do not know how to do it,” Smith says.

That’s where C3 Gardens steps in. They design, plant and maintain attractive color plantings for consumers and businesses.

The plantings are done in self-watering containers so all the customer has to do is just add water. “If we can make it easier for customers to be successful, we will all sell a lot more plants in the long run,” Smith states.

“I’m the guy that supplies the paint and canvass and Jack is the guy that puts it all together. We complement each other extremely well,” Smith says.