

IN PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

Quality, dependability and value are the cornerstones of White's Nursery & Greenhouses as well as the keys to its future.

BY TIM HODSON

Norm White has seen and done a lot during the 60+ years he has been in the growing business.

But one thing has never changed for the owner and founder of White's Nursery & Greenhouses. "I'm still a grower trying to take a cutting and make a perfect plant out of it," he says. That is Norm's goal each and every day.

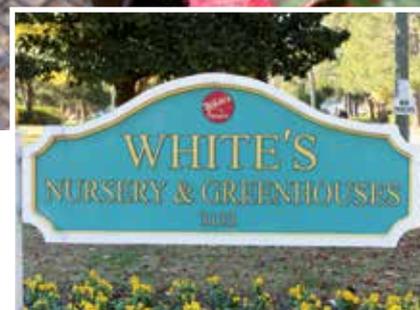
Norm founded White's Nursery & Greenhouses, along with his late wife, Hetty, in 1956 in Chesapeake, Virginia. Back then, he was still working full time as a naval architect in the nearby Norfolk Naval Shipyard.

For nearly 20 years, he worked both jobs — as a grower *and* a naval architect. But in 1973, he decided two full-time careers was one too many and he left the shipyard and dedicated all his efforts to his growing business.

Over the years, Norm and Hetty worked as a team to grow their plants — and their business from a single greenhouse to the 20+ acres of greenhouses today. They wanted to grow the highest quality plants for their customers and keep them coming back. Hetty passed away in January 2016.

Norm and Hetty's two children, daughter Dana White Doyle and son Tal, literally grew up in the business and have been working for the company for more than 30 years now. They team up with their father to oversee the company's sales, marketing and production efforts.

Tal's wife, Sheri, handles the company's production planning along with Norm. She also works with the company's plant vendors and is always looking for ways to enhance their operations in the office and the greenhouse.



WHITE'S NURSERY & GREENHOUSES

AT A GLANCE

Year founded:
1956

Locations:
Chesapeake, Virginia

Total growing space:
20+ acres under cover, 6+ acres field

Key personnel:
Norm White, president; Dana White Doyle, vice president;
Tal White, general manager; Sheri White, production planner

Customers:
Supermarkets, warehouse clubs, independent garden centers,
contract growing, Internet sales and their own retail garden center

Number of employees:
150 Winter – 200 Spring

Website:
www.whitesnursery.com



Tal and Sheri White examine the latest crop of poinsettias before they head out the door.



White's Nursery & Greenhouses has grown from a single greenhouse to more than 20 acres under cover.

Big Grower recently visited Chesapeake to sit down with the Whites to learn more about the company, its strategy for competing in today's market and where things are headed.

A NEW ERA

White's specializes in growing potted chrysanthemums, bedding plants, hanging baskets, potted blooming plant varieties and holiday flowering crops.

The company's customer base is made up of supermarkets, warehouse clubs, independent garden centers contract growing for other growers, Internet sales and their own retail garden center.

While Norm's goal has always been to grow the highest quality plant, nowadays Tal says it also has evolved to "provide the highest value to our customers." Neither task is simple, but achieving both is the ultimate goal.

The company has flourished over the years, but Norm, Dana, Tal and Sheri all realize it is a different market in 2017 and they are making sure their company is well positioned for future success.

"The industry has really, really, really changed," Norm says. Consumers don't consume as much as they used to, and retailers don't value their products the way they did in the past.

"The average consumer isn't connecting with our product and what it can do for them in an emotional, physical way. They don't understand it anymore," Dana says.

"Our product has to be seen. It has to be touched. It has to be smelled. That's what our product is all about," Dana says. Retailers need to help consumers "experience" their plants and flowers in the store.

And retailers don't view plant sales the way they used to either, Norm says. For many of them, floral products are now just a commodity to be bought and sold at the lowest possible price.

"The commitment of supermarkets as well as the big boxes is not the same as it was. [Many of them] have devalued our product" and plants have just become another product category in their store, Norm says.

As retail outlets have changed, so has their relationship with the grower. It used to be at a much more personal level. "We had a relationship and we could work together," Norm says.

That relationship also provided a healthy exchange of information for both parties. The retailers knew what types of challenges the grower was facing and the grower could learn more about the specific needs of a retailer.

Now it is all about the lowest price the retailer will pay for the product — and not taking into account what the grower has to do to produce the plant.

Tal says one of the company's strategies to address this changing retail landscape and its customers base is through new market channels.

"The market is very segmented today. There are market channels out there, but it is all about finding them and execution," Tal says. "We need to be where our target market is."

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TAKING THE CONSUMER'S PULSE

Norm White has been growing plants all of his life. In 1956 he started his wholesale grower business on the same property his father Willis grew field grown cut flowers.

In 1986, he opened his own garden center — White's Old Mill Garden Center in Chesapeake — on the same tract of land as he and his wife's Grower Division.

The garden center provides an opportunity to test market new plants or concepts and see what consumers are buying.

"Our retail garden center keeps us on track and 'real' with the products we grow and produce," says Tal White. "We can quickly tell what's going to be a future 'hit' at other retailers based upon how it performs in our garden center."



collective power to create good jobs with good training that become good careers for all our associates,” as outlined by CEO Doug McMillon. This vision indicates an understanding that wage increases alone are not enough to recruit and retain employees — company culture and respect of human dignity matters, also.

In a statement about its plans to grow for the future, Wal-Mart further committed to being a place where the ambitious and eager can get their first job, build meaningful and fundamental employment skills, and “have a clear path to grow and succeed — whether or not they remain with the company.” Wal-Mart is also a participant in the White House First Jobs Compact, a nationwide initiative to help youth connect to their first jobs.

THE LABOR POOL

The Wal-Mart model, while not foolproof or 100 percent proven, offers some keen ideas to tackle the wage pressure issue coupled with the diminishing labor pool. National unemployment continues to hover at or slightly below five percent with unemployment in many localities even less than that. Across the industry, this shrink is felt as employers search for reliable sources of labor.

- **White House First Jobs Compact** — Many greenhouse businesses can share in this strategy at least informally to provide meaningful “first job” opportunities to out-of-school or out-of-work youth. Many of these youth can serve as reliable seasonal labor throughout their late high school years and during college.
- **Refugees** — This is proving to be a new source of labor for many greenhouse jobs requiring limited English skills. At AmericanHort’s Plug & Cutting conference, for example, Bailey Nurseries shared how it has found success working with Burmese

refugees as a source for seasonal labor. The same strategies used to work with Spanish-speaking employees are easily translatable to refugee employees, shared Joe Bailey, Bailey Nurseries’ human resources manager. Bailey also said that many of these communities are often “self-recruiting,” thus propagating a reliable labor pool.

- **The H-2A and H-2B visa programs** — These continue to be avenues for securing immigrant labor. It is important to rely on sound legal help rather than common sense alone when navigating the paperwork process. Equally important is starting the process early and submitting paperwork as soon as is allowed.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING

Offering a competitive wage is not only a necessary step in complying with federal and state standards, but it can also be an important recruitment tool. Further recruitment strategies include:

- **Understanding your labor competitors, not just industry competitors.** Greenhouse operations aren’t the only businesses seeking base-skill labor. Manufacturing, warehouse, retail and even postal jobs seek similar candidates. What do these other businesses offer in terms of wages, benefits, and flexibilities to attract workers? And what incentives do they provide to help retain and promote talented labor? And as in most competitive strategy, how can you either do what they’re doing better or fill an unspoken niche?
- **Hiring earlier.** If the retail holiday season is any indication of the shrinking base-skill labor pool, then it’s clear that there is a competitive need for manpower. Many of the country’s major corporations, including Wal-Mart, UPS and Amazon began their holiday staffing recruitment earlier than

ever in 2016 and backed it up by revamped training programs to get seasonal employees up to speed quickly. For example, Amazon relied on technology like touch screens and robots to reduce new hire training time from a standard six weeks to two days. Minimizing this training time not only saved money, but it also afforded Amazon the opportunity to offer more competitive wages, especially critical in the race for labor.

- **Recognizing the human dignity of workers.** With unemployment low and businesses of all varieties in need of solid labor, “good” workers have the ability to “shop” for their employers, rather than vice versa. That means that the more attractive you can make your company culture and employee benefits package — including material, financial, social and work-life balance flexibilities, the more effective your business will be in competing for talent and skills.

While still young, 2017 ushers in an air of uncertainty. However, uncertain times bring with it a certain level of unforeseen opportunity. The biggest takeaway is that employers are not only competitors in commerce but also in the race for reliable and good labor.

The innovative, well-informed, proactive and flexible employers will be the victors. Finally, horticulture businesses as a whole continue to offer unique employment experiences that should be promoted and exploited for the value they bring to both communities and individuals. ■

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Places like a home shopping channel or QVC or Amazon could be a possibility in the future. “Could you put our products on something like that? Would it work?” Dana asks. “I don’t know, but we have to find [the best] ways of connecting with our target consumer group.”

MARKETING TO MILLENNIALS

Like everyone else in the industry, the Whites are looking for ways to capitalize on the millennial generation who aren’t buying plants and flowers.

“We still have to figure out how to get [the millennials] back in to the fold. I think it is going to happen but it is going to take time,” Norm states.

They don’t buy plants like previous generations, and they are buying their homes later in life. Tal says it is the “settledness of home formation” that will be the impetus for millennials to get into plants and gardening.

One way to reach that demographic is through some type of industry-wide marketing initiative to help promote the consumption of plants and flowers.

“We have got to have something out there that will draw these people in,” Dana says, something that will educate them and extoll the benefits of what plants have to offer.

Norm has been a long-time believer that this is something the industry needs. He is frustrated that previous efforts to launch this kind of program have been unsuccessful but he would still like to see it happen.



White’s specializes in growing potted blooming plant varieties, bedding plants, hanging baskets and holiday flowering crops.

“It works for so many other industries,” Norm adds. “Why not ours?”

Dana thinks maybe someone outside our industry would be a candidate to launch some kind of a marketing campaign. Someone who appreciates our products but brings in a fresh perspective.

WHAT’S ON THE HORIZON?

As White’s Nursery & Greenhouse enters its 61st year in business, Norm and his family are always looking

for new opportunities to continue to grow their business.

One of those opportunities is producing plugs.

“We’ve been doing plugs now for about four years and we are getting good at them, but I want to do them one more year to make sure we are really good,” before opening production up to other greenhouses or brokers.

But his plug plans will be on a limited scale. “I’m not going to do everything, just certain things I know we can do well,” Norm says. “I want to keep it more regional because I want customers to get something that is perfect.”

Another new category that could make its way into White’s greenhouses in the coming years is cannabis. All of the family members, Norm, Dana, Tal and Sheri are in agreement that it is a new growth opportunity for the company.

“I think [cannabis] has a health benefit, and I don’t think anyone should be deprived of having that health benefit!” Dana remarks. She believes the government should treat marijuana just like alcohol and tobacco.

Tal is eager to explore the new product category as soon as cannabis use is legalized in Virginia. He looks at the production numbers and potential revenue it offers and he likes what he sees. He thinks it is definitely worth pursuing.

The biggest hurdle for Norm is that it is a new crop — one he has never grown before.

But after 60 years in the business, he is definitely up for taking on the new challenge! ■