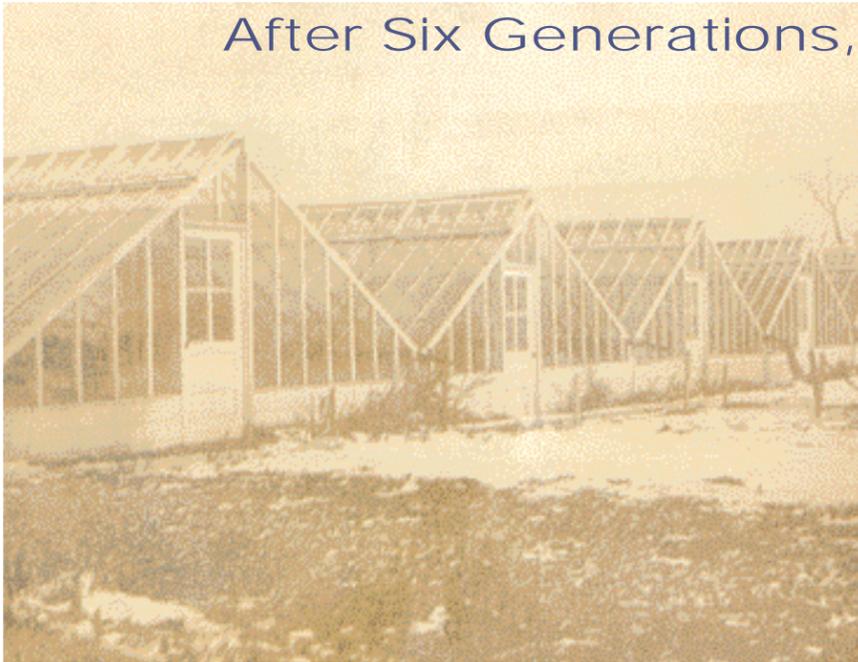


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After Six Generations, Wagner Floral Company Is Anything But Old



First-generation greenhouses circa 1870s.

From an 1847 start as a truck farm, this business has blossomed into a full-fledged floral operation. New greenhouses will allow further expansion into the future, while helping them cut heating costs today.

By Mary Stoerp

For six generations, Wagner Floral Company has served the floral market in and around Tiffin, Ohio. You could say that over the generations not much has changed. They still serve a predominantly local market. The company has been run by a Wagner for over one hundred and fifty years. And, it still seems to take a war — or at least time in service — to bring a Wagner man back into the family business.

Wagner Floral Company boasts the designation of “oldest family company under the same name” in Seneca County. The family is especially proud of the Century Farm Award they received this year from the Catholic Diocese of Toledo, honoring them as the oldest farmland still operated by the same family in the deanery’s area.

As the business has been handed down through the generations, however, progressively larger changes have been seen in Wagner’s greenhouse structures and equipment. Also, changes have been seen in competition. For years, Wagner’s has been the only “greenhouse” in the county, but now they must compete with the Big Boxes — Kmart, Walmart, Home Depot and Lowe’s — which loom not far away.

MANAGEMENT OVER TIME

The first generation of Wagners, headed by Anton, started the business in 1847 as a truck farm. Small wooden greenhouses with regular glass were erected in 1860, covering an area of about 5,000-6,000 sq. ft. The greenhouses, constructed for vegetable starts, had one man-door on the end of each; you could not walk between them. These greenhouses passed down to Anton’s son, Francis A., in 1872; eight of the structures were torn down at the turn of the century.

New greenhouse construction was initiated in 1915, but due to WWI, the project could not be completed until 1919. The five new greenhouses were 30 x 100 foot rough houses — totaling 15,000 sq. ft. — constructed with Louisiana blue gulf cypress rafters.

Frank A., the Wagner’s third generation owner, saw the potential of a floral shop, and the 1930s brought that addition. Wagner’s grew all of the cutflowers sold in the shop — carnations, mums, snapdragons and sweetpeas, later adding geraniums, spring flowers and poinsettias.

Frank M. took over the business in the late 1950s, and again, a Wagner owner foresaw expansion. During the 1960s, an additional 12,000 sq. ft. were added as the Wagners expanded onto an additional 10 acres.

THE WAGNERS OF TODAY

The latest generation of Wagner owners took over the operation in 1972, when the business was put into the capable hands of brothers James and Walter. They oversaw a new leap into the future in the construction of a garden store in 1992, added because the floral shop was doing such a brisk business.

The Wagners, as aforementioned, have seen their share of service in the armed forces. Frank M. was in WWI; Walter served in WWII; and James served in Korea. Walter’s son Mark, who runs the grower end of the business, served during the Vietnam era. Mark’s son Justin, who just got out of the Coast Guard, maintains greenhouse operations, while waiting in the wings is Mark’s son Alex, in his second tour of duty for the Coast Guard.

Aside from these service veterans, there are others of Wagner lineage involved in the business (or who may become involved in the future). James’s wife Phyllis, James’s daughter Sue, Walter and James’ sister Ginny and her daughter Patty, and Mark’s wife Sally all work for the company. Mark’s daughter Gretchen is in nursing school now, but who knows what the future may bring? And then there’s two-year-old William, Justin’s son, who may just become the



Left: Wagners’ greenhouses circa 1950s, constructed after WWI. Right: 2001 glass roof extrusion system greenhouses. (Photo by Randy Van Dam, courtesy of Nexus Corp. Others courtesy of Wagner Floral Company.)





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The Wagners of today, from left: James, Walter, Mark, William, Justin. (Photos by Randy Van Dam, courtesy of Nexus Corp.)

eighth generation in the business.

These, then, are the latest crop of Wagners — along with their dedicated staff — now ushering in a new era of the company's life. October 2000 saw the beginnings of Wagner's biggest expansion to date. All existing buildings and additions — except three 30 x 100 foot outback greenhouses — were torn down to make room for four brand new Nexus greenhouses.

STRUCTURES, EQUIPMENT AND COSTS

Wagner Floral Company can now boast not only about their "oldest business" status, but also their status as one of the "newest" owners of the recently introduced Nexus glass roof extrusion greenhouse systems. The four new greenhouses give the Wagners over 12,000 sq. ft. of growing space (one 36 x 72 ft., one 36 x 84 ft., and two 36 x 96 ft. structures). The new Nexus greenhouses, according to Mark, will help the company compete against those Big Boxes. The Nexus structures alone cost \$152,000, with labor costing approximately \$50,000. The new bed/display area (10,000 sq. ft.) cost an additional \$30,000.

Demolition of the old structures was accomplished mainly by the Wagners to help keep costs down. Local high school

students were employed to help excavate the new building site.

After lengthy deliberations, the Wagners' decision to go with glass will really pay off, considering the extremely high cost of greenhouse heating these days. Walter wanted to go back to glass because of the traditional style, but they had considered using rigid poly for the roof. However, if they had done that, they would have needed to purchase a heat/save curtain, and thus would not have realized any substantial cost savings. With glass, they hope to save 30 percent on their heating bills.

The old Wagner structures utilized a hot water boiler. This has been replaced with a new Burnham boiler — a 2 million BTU hot water boiler — costing \$20,000, which heats the BioTherm high density polyethylene (HDX) tubing that runs through the concrete floor.

In 1992, the Wagner's installed geotherm heat in the flower shop floor; this is still in place, and they and their customers have been very happy with it. As BioTherm claims, "It's like walking on a warm sidewalk on a sunny day, and customers want to stay around longer."

The closed system heats ground water coming from the well, passing it through a heat exchanger and back into the well. The new heating in the floor, including the cement floor

itself, cost \$28,000. Wagner's expects to see a payback from the new heating system in only four to five years.

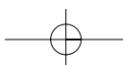
Other components purchased for the new greenhouses are shown below, including names of vendors:

- fifty benches (plastic tops, fiberglass frames and legs) — Agri of Virginia Inc.;
- polycarbonate side covering for the sidewalls — Green-Tek, 2,800 sq. ft. of standard 8 mm, twin-wall polycarbonate and 3,000 sq. ft. of new 8 mm, high-clarity (higher visibility) polycarbonate (noted by Green-Tek as especially good for retail operations);
- glass roof covering (noted by Wagners to be of excellent clarity and strength) — Guardian;
- four 300,000 BTU unit heaters — Lennox;
- sixteen horizontal air flow (HAF) fans — Schaefer;
- vent motors, environmental controls and shade system — Wadsworth Controls.

The search continues for a new irrigation system. Wagner's will employ the age-old standby, hand-watering, until they make their decision.

PROJECT TIMELINE

Construction was scheduled to begin October 15, 2000. Several delays were experienced, however,





the biggest of which came in the form of bad weather. No one had anticipated this being one of the roughest winters in recent history, and the Wagners faced some hard business decisions. Since the old structures — aside from the outback greenhouses — had been demolished, they had to come up with some clever ideas to counteract the weather delays.

Those outback greenhouses, after being revamped with gas pipes and lines and switched to propane heat, helped them keep a portion of their greenhouse business operational. Although their Christmas and Easter crops have been affected, they managed to get through the holiday season by bringing plants in from other growers to sell in their retail shop. Additionally, Wagner's also produces bulbs for resale, which are grown in special bulb cellars, unaffected by the new construction.

A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD

Even though construction delays have made things tough, the Wagners have remained strong — and they have remained positive. In fact, Mark said, "I am very optimistic, and hopefully, this will create a solid base for some of my future generations. I am very proud and thankful to be a part of the family

tradition, and I'm doing the best that I can do to pass it on to future generations. And, I'm thankful to the previous generation for their farsightedness in establishing this business."

The full-time Wagner employees of the company are quick to note that their past and future success is in large part attributable to a great group of dedicated employees, along with other Wagner family members who help them out during their busiest, most demanding seasons.

Mark and Sally speculate that Wagner Floral Company products will be better in the future. Even though there were delays, they won't look back; their focus is on the promises of the future. Bedding plants were started in the outback greenhouses and were being moved into the new greenhouses at the time of this writing. A grand opening is in the works for late spring.

Soon, the Wagners can look back and say it was all worth it. With a projected 30 percent increase in sales, according to Mark, payback will be seen in approximately 8-10 years. A rosy future indeed seems in the budding for both present and future Wagner Floral Company generations. 

Mary Stoerp is an associate editor for GPN.

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Let The Sun Shine In

Want to go back to the advantages of glass but without the maintenance headaches? Check out the benefits of a glass roof extrusion system.

Growers need an economical structure with a durable cover that offers high light for their crops, but they also need easy-to-install extrusions that require limited maintenance. Because of these basic requirements, many growers have stayed away from glass coverings on their greenhouses.

Thanks in part to a new introduction by Nexus, glass is once again becoming a more popular choice. The benefits of glass are clear, literally. Glass has one of the highest lifespans on the market, mostly because there is no yellowing or "fogging." Additionally, today's tempered glass can withstand more weather conditions than the glass typically used in the past, providing durability, longevity and increased light.

The new Nexus extrusion design combines the best of the old and the new: wider glass panels and the cost savings of lapped glass. Traditional lapped glass systems available on the market today require more support bars and use very small pieces of glass. This new system is more economical than wide-spanned gasketed glass houses and is easier to install.

The extrusion system answers the need for more light through its wider purlin/extrusion spacing. Purlins are reduced by over 1/3 from a traditional system, while spacing is increased by 50 percent. These two items mean that more light enters the greenhouse.

Most lapped glass extrusion systems today use butyl putty rope for sealing. Nexus' system does not. It is a dry glazing system that incorporates a rubber cap to seal the elements.

More information is available at www.nexuscorp.com.

