



Herbs

Amid the Foliage

A history of Disney-inspired experimentation led one grower off the well-worn tropical path toward a bright future in specialty plants.

By Brandi Danielle Thomas

To most of its revelers, Walt Disney World's landscaping seems to play an unassuming, secondary role to the amusement rides and human-sized cartoon characters that so captivate childrens' imaginations. But the ever-famous theme park might not be quite what it is today without the help of Orlando-based Shore Acres Nursery Inc., whose relationship with Disney extends back to 1969, two years before the park opened. It was then that owners Robert D. Mitchell Sr. and Robert D. Mitchell Jr. conducted experimental work for Disney, growing seed items from all over the world, especially eucalyptus trees. Later, Shore Acres' production shifted to annual pack material for the theme park, and more recently into 4-inch and 1-gallon containers.

The elder Mitchell started Shore Acres in the 1930s as a foliage producer. He moved into bedding plants in 1967, when few producers were in that segment of the business and it was a good

market. Bedding plants were also a crop Shore Acres could produce without tremendous expenditure, since it was easy to convert greenhouses from foliage to bedding plant production. All seeding was done by hand back then, and they launched the converted business with about six benches of petunias, sans the help of Bonzi, and all of the other "standard" chemicals used today.

Today, hand-seeding has become self-sowing via a Blackmore turbo seeder; other automation includes two Bouldin & Lawson potting machines, with everything done on a transplant line. While the company does intend to incorporate further automation in the future, Vice President of Sales Liz Stevens believes "there is no substitute for people. Because we grow so many varieties through the course of the year, [large-scale automation] is going to be tough. We do have misting lines because we produce all of our own cuttings, but for the most part, we hand-water finished product, with a few exceptions, and our plug ranges are hand-watered."

MERGING OLD AND NEW

Some of the technology at Shore Acres has changed, but the tradition of seeking out new markets still runs in the blood of daughters Liz Stevens and Robyn Bazemore.

At two locations 12 miles apart, plastic-covered hoop houses, protecting 100,000 sq. ft. of growing area, as well as 1 1/4 acres of shade cloth and 2 acres of outdoor production, are the birthing grounds for the company's contract and specialty production. Aside from producing the basic items, such as begonias and impatiens, the over 75-year-old business has expanded substantially into vegetative and specialty seed plants: vegetative verbenas, dahlias, double impatiens, geraniums, snapdragons, trailing New Guineas, delphiniums, poinsettias, primulas and ranunculus are just a few of the new product offerings.

The product mix at Shore Acres is about 40 percent annuals, 10 percent perennials and 15 percent herbs. Specialty items make up the balance. Disney is Shore Acres' single-largest



Left: Herb liners in one of Shore Acres' plastic-covered hoop houses. Center: The Shore Acres management team, from left: Liz Stevens, Robert Mitchell Jr., Helen Mitchell and Robyn Bazemore. Right: Finished herbs are sold on contract and supply the company's own retail operation.

grower success

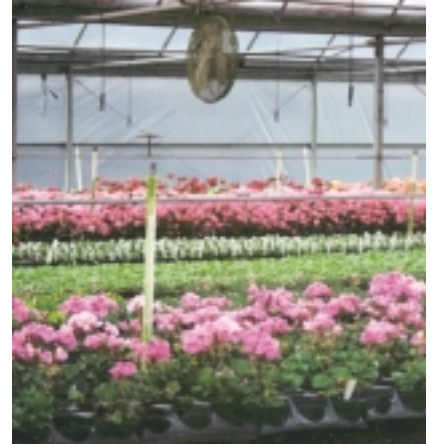
customer and, between all of their customers, about 50-60 percent of their production is contract-grown.

Liz, who has been with Shore Acres for 14 years, encourages continuation of the contract work because she sees it as a niche Shore

Acres can easily fill. "We are not one of the really big growers in Florida. Because of our size, we're able to diversify in the amount of varieties that we grow," Liz said of Shore Acres' strengths. "We're able to do things that the larger grow-

ers don't want to mess with: variety selection and small quantities."

Eleven years ago, Robyn, Shore Acres' vice president of herb production, capitalized on the operation's ability to experiment with new products. She took her interest in herbs,



Geraniums are one of Shore Acres' specialty crops from seed.

seeing an opportunity in the market, and channeled it into two benches of 4-inch herb production.

"I had an interest in them, and there was a market out there," she explained. "People were asking for herbs, so we started growing a few varieties. Gradually, people have become more interested in our herbs; over the past 10 years, there's been an interest in healthy living and the medicinal use of herbs. While we don't promote their medicinal use — as it poses a liability issue — we do give the historical use for them."

Today, herbs are an integral part of Shore Acres' business, making up about 15 percent of sales. Shore Acres supplies independent garden centers, restaurants and hotels, and major theme parks with over 150 varieties of 4- and 6-inch herbs.

Robyn oversees the entire herb program from scheduling to growing, including the plug and liner program. She also has a background in computer information, which has helped with the growth of her herb business. Information dissemination is key in this industry, and Robyn is well aware of the need to educate both retailers and home gardeners about her specialty crop.

"I promote the use of herbs in the landscape as well as the culinary, aromatic and health values by lecturing at seminars, garden clubs and garden centers," she said. "I have also assisted customers in designing herb gardens as well as outlining herb programs for retailers."

The herbs also comprise a large segment of retail sales at Shore Acres' own retail garden center. Currently occupying approximately 1 acre, Shore Acres' retail area is partly under cover, includes display gardens and continues to expand.

"Our retail garden center was

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originally opened to service a part of town that was in a heavy-growth stage,” Robyn said. “There really aren’t any garden centers in that area of town, so we don’t compete with our wholesale customer base. We had a lot of people walking into the greenhouses and wanting to buy from us, so we decided to go ahead and give it a try because we saw a future for us in having a garden center.”

Shore Acres’ full-service retail center is now three years old. They sell what is grown at their wholesale operation, but also bring in outside product. Their product selection covers everything from herbs to landscaping products, woodies and trees.

DIVERSIFICATION IS KEY

At the same time Shore Acres began to sell retail, they also scrutinized other parts of their business to come up with additional profit possibilities. “Over the last few years we’ve tried to switch to different crops where there’s not enough demand to interest the big guys but where there is still money to be made,” said Liz. “That helps us make up some of the costs that we lose on the bread and butter crops like petunias and impatiens.”


As a result, Shore Acres has drawn on their growing expertise in herbs to expand their wholesale production of herb plugs and liners and are now distributing plugs to other finish producers in the Southeast. Having made a name for themselves as specialty plug and liner growers, the market has responded. Over the past year, distribution, mostly through major brokers, has grown to include producers throughout the United States. Robyn expects their plug and liner business to comprise a large portion of the company’s future growth, with many of their plug customers supplying finished product to the major chain stores.

The biggest challenge Shore Acres faces in herb growing is the lack of chemicals labeled for herb usage. But pests and diseases have not hobbled them in the absence of such chemicals; these threats have only fostered greater crop care and preventive measures.

Robyn has found that proper water management and a clean environment help them maintain quality. If those actions fail, however, they are forced to dispose of infected or infested crops. “This makes growing herbs more diffi-

cult than bedding plants in that we are limited in controlling pests and disease,” she explained.

Facing new challenges like this is nothing new for Shore Acres, though. Having reinvented themselves several times during their

75-year history, no one will be surprised to find this small Florida grower forging new paths. 

Brandi Danielle Thomas is associate editor of GPN.

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