

POTENTIAL, *Recognized*

Although fairly new to the greenhouse industry, Howard and Mark Nash have established a successful operation through recognizing opportunities and taking chances on innovation.

BY JASMINA DOLCE

Mark Nash and his father, Howard, are not your typical greenhouse owners. They did not grow up in the business, nor do they have an educational background in horticulture. As a matter of fact, there's a strong possibility neither one of them would have been able to differentiate a petunia from a geranium 10 years ago. That's definitely not the case today, but it's been a work in progress and their continued involvement in their relatively young greenhouse business has paid off.

Prior to establishing Nash Greenhouse in 2003, Howard and Mark had full-time jobs outside the industry. Howard was a long time business owner, and Mark worked in accounting. However, they had worked together on joint business ventures — including car washes and storage facilities. That experience in business ownership is what ultimately provided the background as well as the assets to establish Nash Greenhouse.

NASH GREENHOUSE: *at a glance*

ESTABLISHED: 2003

FOUNDERS: Howard and Mark Nash

LOCATION: Two facilities in Kalamazoo, Mich., and one in Portage, Mich.

GROWING AREA: 30 acres

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 42 year round, 110-120 during peak season

SPECIALTY: Flowering annuals, vegetables and herbs. Brands grown include Wave Petunia, Burpee and Simply Beautiful.



Nash Greenhouse has evolved from a flat and basket producer to a one-stop shop for garden centers.

OUTSIDERS STEPPING IN

The opportunity to own a greenhouse presented itself to Mark and Howard Nash when a friend was contemplating getting out of the greenhouse business. Howard spent a year working at Dick's Greenhouse to gain some insight, while Mark crunched the numbers.

"Mark said the numbers looked good, and so we proceeded from there," shares Howard. So the Nash duo purchased the older greenhouse in Kalamazoo, Mich., and changed the name to Nash Greenhouse.

The transition went a little smoother than expected, according to Mark. "It actually was pretty easy to establish relationships with vendors. Kalamazoo has many greenhouses within a small area. This makes it very easy for vendors to hit a lot of potential customers within a short amount of time."

In the beginning, the Nashes kept business the same as the previous owner but later expanded on opportunities once new relationships were built.

"I think the more you are involved and the more people you meet, you find that developing relationships is pretty easy. Other greenhouse owners are pretty open about their likes and dislikes."

WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS, EXPAND!

Mark and Howard learned early on that expanding their product offering would be the key to their success. The first couple of years in business, Nash Greenhouse sold product predominantly through the Kalamazoo Co-Op, however, the idea of having one main sales route concerned them.

"The idea of multiple delivery channels really comes from my first business," says Howard. "I had one major customer that decided to go in a different direction. It could have put us under, but we had already begun to diversify our client base, and that just gave us the push we needed to commit fully to diversification."

"Once we committed to diversification here at the greenhouse, we were blessed with an opportunity to do just that. Another friend of the family was getting out of the greenhouse business due to health issues," says Mark. "We purchased this greenhouse for the customer base and because of their reputation."

A new type of hybrid contract growing allows the Nashes to handle distribution and support directly with the customers.





That purchase made it possible to begin diversifying the business even further. Shortly after buying the second facility, they hired Ric Stevens whose job was to work with large greenhouses to add contract growing to their production.

Contract growing had become so successful that the Nashes eventually bought a third facility in 2011. Starting at 7 acres, Nash Greenhouse now comprises nearly 30 acres of growing space between the three facilities.

Going forward, Nash Greenhouse does have expansion capabilities but they're in no rush. "At one facility we have 10 acres behind that we can add to," shares Howard.

"We have continued to grow as fast as the bank would allow us since day one. With fellow greenhouses going out of business, and the volatility of each season, we have realized that there is potentially a breaking point," says Mark. "We will take it one season at a time. Who knows, those 10 acres could start going up tomorrow or more likely later than that."

STEPS TOWARD DIVERSIFICATION

Today, the Nashes have established a very diverse product offering, which is sold to a wide range of customers. Product grown at Nash Greenhouse finds its way to the market via contractors, brokers and independent garden centers.

"We're always looking for innovative ways to be ahead of the curve," shares Howard. "In order to be successful in any business, you've got to be unique. If you're not moving one step forward, you're going two backward."

When a new opportunity presents itself, Mark and Howard take it into serious consideration. They are currently working with a new hybrid type of contract growing.

According to Mark, they are pleased with this because it gives Nash Greenhouse more ownership of the product.

Although finished plants make up a large majority of their production, the Nashes have recently gotten into the unrooted cuttings and young plant market.

In 2012, Nash Greenhouse partnered with HMA Plants and is now producing URCs for them as well as their gerbera plugs. And that program is growing rapidly.

"We continue to stay focused on quality whether or not it is finished or prefinished. We have more than doubled the amount of URCs pro-



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Simply Beautiful is among the branded programs offered through Nash Greenhouse.

duced from last year to this year,” says Howard. “This relationship started from Chad Earles, our grower, and Chad has taken ownership of it.”

When it comes to the IGC segment of their business, Mark and Howard take great advantage of their diversification to promote their product. Bill Stephenson, who handles sales to garden centers, “has a great marketing mind,” says Mark. “He has expanded my comfort level. He wants to be somebody who can go to a garden center and be that one-stop shop for them.”

Nash Greenhouse has the capability to present a diverse offering because of their willingness to evolve. The products they offer may change from year to year. “At the end of each season, we try to figure out with our direct customers, contract partners and brokers what worked and what didn’t,” explains Mark.

“We have had some programs that continue to grow within our own garden center business, such as Wave petunias, Simply Beautiful programs and Burpee vegetables,” he adds. “Bill has really taken us from a flat and basket producer to a true supplier that can provide what the garden center customers need — variety.”

PROMOTING EFFICIENCY

As most greenhouse owners and operators know, the greenhouse business can be risky. Product pricing has declined while input costs continue to increase. While these factors can be concerning, Mark and Howard have been aggressive in investing for the future.

“Right now, pricing is a challenge,” says Howard. “Prices go down, but plastic and diesel fuel goes up. So our challenge is to become more efficient.”

“Efficiency at Nash Greenhouse is looked at both in terms of labor and utilities,” explains Mark. “One example for utilities is when we bought our first greenhouse, it had two boilers that, I kid you not, were the size of a school bus. Both of them ran at 65 percent efficiency if we were lucky. We changed those two out for six Hamilton boilers, each the size of a cupboard at your home. Those run at 99 percent efficiency.”



DID YOU *Know?*

Nash Greenhouse is the world’s first full-time Wave petunia grower!

In 2010, Nash Greenhouse received a Wave Petunia Appreciation Award from PanAmerican Seed. The company’s Wave petunias were even pictured in promotions for Ball Seed and PanAmerican Seed.

"IN ORDER TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN ANY BUSINESS, YOU'VE GOT TO BE UNIQUE. IF YOU'RE NOT MOVING *one step forward*, YOU'RE GOING *two backward*."

— HOWARD NASH



Howard and Mark Nash founded Nash Greenhouse in 2003 after spending time working in non-horticulture related industries.

The Nashes have also installed heat curtains into a larger range to save energy during the colder months. "We ended up taking out eight heaters in that range alone because we just didn't need the BTUs anymore," says Mark.

"These examples may seem pretty miniscule, but we keep looking to make those kinds of changes in order to save on utilities. And if we make lots of those small changes, then it should add up to a big change in the long run," he adds.

Regarding labor efficiency, this is another area where Mark says all of the small things add up. "Some things like making the sidewalks bigger to allow the product to be directly put onto the shipping car instead of handling it two times is one example."

Their first major purchase towards labor efficiency was a TTA transplanter. This new equipment resulted in six less people on that planting line and more consistent planning.

HANDS-ON INVOLVEMENT

One thing the Nashes have learned on this venture is the importance of getting their hands dirty. Mark and Howard, along with their employees, consider themselves a "team."

"I don't really consider ourselves a big greenhouse," says Mark. "There's not much of a hierarchy; here it is fairly flat. We've got head growers at each location, and there's a couple of leaders that run certain crews. That's during the season. In the off season, anybody will pick up a hammer, anybody will pick up a screwdriver, anybody can be an electrician or a plumber or a sweeper. Everybody pitches in."

On any given day, you may find Mark on the planting line, emptying trailers or pulling carts. Or you may find Howard troubleshooting a broken down machine or moving product from one greenhouse to another in the tractor.

"There's nothing better than talking to your customer and actually being the one putting their product on the cart," Mark says.

"I like being involved because I figure for certain things that if I can do it, then you can do it. If I don't have some sort of measurable, then I can't complain that something is taking too long. I also like to get to know each person in the greenhouse. By the end of the season, I hope to have worked alongside each person that is employed by me for a period of time." ■

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Nash Greenhouse's three production facilities in southwest Michigan encompass 30 acres and employ 120 workers during peak season.