

unlimited POTENTIAL

Plants Unlimited knows and understands the art and science of contract growing to help other growers meet the ever-changing requirements of today's retailers.

By
TIM HODSON

Over the years, contract growing has become a strategic tool for many large growers – especially in today's challenging economy. It can provide growers with the agility they need to meet the demands of their retail customers.

When most people think of contract growing they think it's about a large grower contracting with a smaller grower to produce one specific item or crop to help fill out their overall production needs for their customers.

That's not the case for Plants Unlimited in Kalamazoo, Mich.

Owner Nirmal Shah is anything but a monoculture grower and his greenhouse operation is definitely not small.

Shah and Plants Unlimited understand the art and science of contract growing. The large contract grower has found a niche that works very well and is providing multiple large growers with a huge variety of varieties.

Big Grower had a chance to visit Plants Unlimited during one of, if not, the busiest weeks of the year — Mother's Day week.

Spring was definitely in the air. The crews were working double shifts, loading carts with color that were flying through the greenhouses on their way to the loading docks so they could begin their journey to just about every big box retailer you can name, as well as independent garden centers and landscape operations.

caption



Owners Nirmal and Rachna Shah

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PLANTS UNLIMITED *at a glance*

LOCATION: Kalamazoo, Mich.

OWNERS: Nirmal and Rachna Shah

SPECIALTY: Contract growing for growers serving the major chains and big box retailers, independent garden centers and landscapers

GROWING AREA: Approximately 17 acres

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: Approximately 40 year-round (100+ during peak season)



Plants Unlimited grows more than 100 different varieties — from ornamentals to edibles.

MAN WITH A MISSION

Nirmal Shah came to the United States from his native India in 1999 to get a master's degree in horticulture from Penn State University.

He graduated in December 2000 and two days after his commencement ceremonies began working for Larry Boven at Van Boven's Greenhouse in Kalamazoo.

Today, he owns the greenhouses where his career started along with five or six more acres that have been added over the years.

When he began at Van Boven's, Shah did not have a lot of hands-on greenhouse experience. He basically started as a section grower and several short months later (right before the spring season) Boven asked him if he was interested in becoming the company's head grower.

"I told him 'I have all of the interest, but none of the experience,'" Shah says.

That didn't matter to Boven because he knew Shah would learn on the job. He says Boven mentored him in all of the nuances of their facilities and the business and soon he was very comfortable in his role.

Shah jokes that Boven "held my hand and gave me several second and third chances."

Over the next six years, Shah and Boven developed a close relationship and in 2006 they had a heart-to-heart conversation about Shah's future. It was then that Shah expressed his desire to own his own greenhouse business some day.

"I come from a family of business people," Shah remarks. His father and uncle owned their own businesses and he wanted to be a business owner also.

During that conversation, Boven offered Shah the opportunity to buy in to Van Boven's. He accepted Boven's offer and approximately a year later took full ownership of the business and rechristened it Plants Unlimited.

However, Shah's introduction into ownership was not without its challenges. Several months after Shah took over the business, his friend and mentor, Boven, died in a

helicopter crash. Shortly after that, one of the company's boilers caught on fire and burned down the building it was housed in.

Looking back, Shah says Boven's death and the fire "were my first real experiences as an owner. What a great way to start!"

While it may have been a bit of a rocky start for Shah, he said he definitely learned from the experience.

Today, Shah co-owns Plants Unlimited with his wife, Rachna. "If it wasn't for Larry and his wife, Barb, we wouldn't be where we are today," Shah says.

FINDING THE RIGHT MODEL

Shah has embraced the contract growing business model since before he took over the business.

When he first started working for Boven, pretty much their only customer was Frank's Nursery & Crafts. When the retailer went under in 2004, Boven and Shah knew they had to change their business model so they wouldn't have all of their proverbial plants in one hanging basket.

Shah recruited Menard's as a new customer while Boven struck a few deals to grow product for other growers in the area and suddenly they were in the contract growing business.

Today that is all Plants Unlimited does. The company grows more than 100 different varieties in 17 acres of greenhouses for "literally any grower in the country who wants to work with us." Plants Unlimited's products "go into every single box store you can think of as well as independents and to landscapers," Shah says.

Shah looks at his current and prospective customers as hopefully being long-term partners. If his customers don't succeed, he doesn't succeed. "If they don't make money and aren't happy with our service, and vice versa, then that relationship isn't going to work."

A big advantage that Plants Unlimited offers to its customers is its sheer size. "One of the things our customers like about us is the flexibility we offer them," Shah remarks.

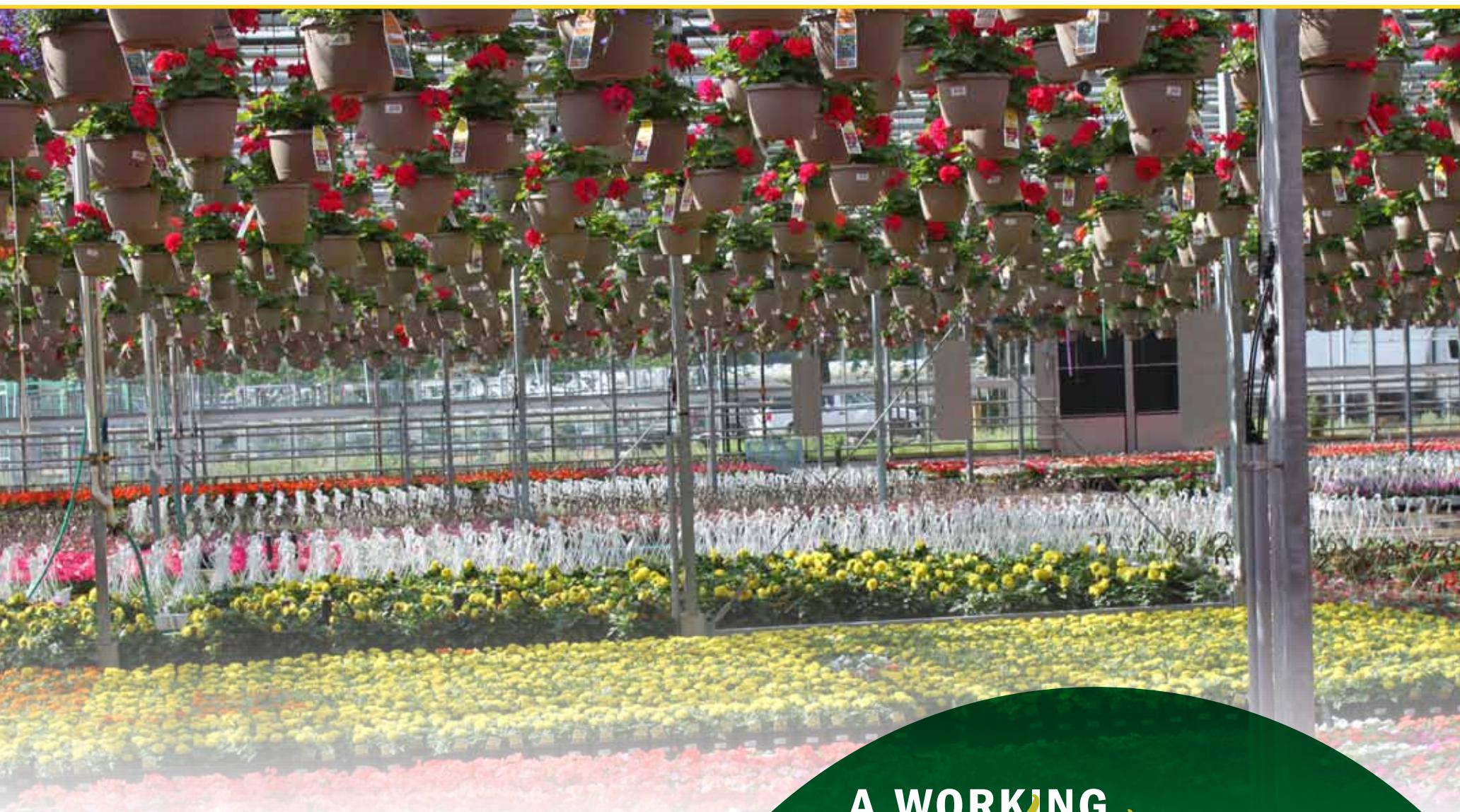
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A WORKING *solution*

Driving down Market Street in Kalamazoo is kind of like driving down Greenhouse Row.

Go to Google maps online and type in the address for Plants Unlimited (5995 Market St., Kalamazoo, Mich.) and click on the satellite view and you can see the road is lined with greenhouses.

Because of this concentration of greenhouses, the growers in the area sometimes compete for labor. To address this issue, Nirmal Shah and Plants Unlimited have found a solution that works for the company that is very practical and cost-effective.

The contract grower uses contract labor.

Just like the flexibility a grower gets by hiring Plants Unlimited, Shah likes the flexibility that temp services provide his business.

It allows him to staff up during peak times or cut back during the slow months.

By using contract labor, he can eliminate, or at least minimize, many of the human resources headaches and paperwork that many business owners face today, but still meet all of the requirements of his customers.

experience and breadth of products, Shah feels he can offer customers "a one-stop shop" to meet their very specific needs. "Tell us what you want and we will grow it!"

"Our greenhouses are very modern. We have a lot of good technology and we can offer very aggressive pricing," he states.

AVOIDING ADVERSITY

Contract growers face different challenges every day. But Shah seems to have a pretty good handle on them. Like all growers, there are risks he has to take but he likes to keep them to a minimum.

He avoided one risk several years ago by expanding his customer base out of the Midwest. Instead of only having one or two local customers, Shah found customers in other parts of the country. So if the weather is not cooperating in one area, maybe it is better in another region and he can shift product there and lessen his risk.

"With multiple customers, we have better geographic exposure," Shah says and that helps minimize the risk.

Another one of Plants Unlimited's biggest challenges, Shah says, is the complicated packaging requirements that many of the retailers now require and that growers must implement. "That is both the biggest challenge and the biggest change that we have seen in the last decade," Shah remarks.

With multiple customers serving multiple retailers, everything must be precise — right pot, right tag, right SKU, etc., hitting the right store at the right time. If one thing is incorrect, it can mean major headaches for everyone.



According to owner Nirmal Shah, Plants Unlimited provides product to "every single box store you can think of," as well as independent garden centers and landscapers.

Shah says they have to pay close attention to each customer's very specific packaging details. While it can be a juggling act distinguishing between all of the different variables, he says it also helps Plants Unlimited really focus on its overall quality.

JUST SAY 'YES'

When Shah sits down with potential customers and they ask him different hypothetical questions about if the company can do this or grow that, "My answer is always 'Yes.'"

Shah knows he is in the service business. As a contract grower it is the company's responsibility to help his grower customers find the custom solutions they need to meet the needs of their retail customers.

With the company's experience working with different growers and retailers and growing so many different products "we'll figure out how to get it done."

He tells his customers, "Just tell us what you want and we will [find the best] way to do it."

Even when they run into inevitable challenges, Shah says it is how they address those problems and find the proper solutions that help instill confidence in his customers and keep them coming back.

"It's our job to make the customer happy," he says. "There is no point in pointing fingers" when there is a problem "because that doesn't solve anything."

The best way to solve (or avoid) problems is through communication. Shah says by improving communication you help minimize surprises for everyone.

He believes in staying in touch with his customers "as much as they want him to." For some, that may mean weekly e-mails or monthly phone calls,

while for others, it may be an annual face-to-face meeting.

Whatever the situation is, Shah wants to make sure his customers are comfortable with what Plants Unlimited is doing for them at all times — but at their own pace. He said once they have an agreement in place, some growers "just don't want to be bothered." That is why they hire a contract grower in the first place.

But he likes to communicate with them "to find out what they are thinking or if they would like us to do things differently." He said it is his goal to "figure out how we can help them get better" at what they are doing.

A CHANGE FOR THE GOOD

As the company's customer base has expanded in recent years, so did some of its challenges. So last year, after reviewing how the greenhouses operated, Shah "regrouped" and decided to restructure many of his key personnel and enhance the bench strength of his team.

Dennis Billmaier and Steve Hordyk manage most of the day-to-day operations, but since Plants Unlimited serves as a contract grower for growers in other parts of the country Shah wanted to hire personnel from other areas. He said this would help redefine the company to meet the different needs of his expanded customer base.

Seven growers, including Hordyk, were added to the payroll in 2011, some with more than 20 years experience. "We needed to add to the infrastructure and to the team to be sure we did a good job [for our customers]."

"We are trying to streamline [our production] since we are growing for so many accounts — by crop, by area, by grower," to be more efficient and improve quality.



With more than 17 acres of greenhouses to cover, Shah zips around on a Segway to check on things and keep informed.



“It’s our job to make the customer happy. There is no point in pointing fingers because that doesn’t solve anything.”

– Nirmal Shah

“We grow more than 100 different varieties and SKUs here, so we are anything but a monoculture grower,” Shah proffers.

He said it wasn’t an easy process and it didn’t happen over night, but he wanted to be sure he found the right people for the right jobs and he is very happy with the results so far.

KEEPING FOCUSED

The future for Plants Unlimited is very bright Shah says.

He feels that today the company is well established in its position as a contract grower and is helping its grower customers meet the demands in a tough marketplace. With a keen eye on what is going on his greenhouses, Shah keeps an eye on the horizon too.

Plants Unlimited has expanded its greenhouse acreage since Shah took over the company but he doesn’t foresee his company getting much larger right now. That doesn’t mean Plants Unlimited won’t ever expand. His goal today is “just getting better” at what they currently do.

Right now the company is going to “Focus on quality. Focus on service. Focus on streamlining. Get the best people in place and make things as efficient as possible,” Shah states, “and ultimately make our customers even happier!” ■

Tim Hodson is editorial director of GPN's Big Grower. He can be reached at thodson@sgcmail.com.