



Modernity, Metamorphosis and Buffalo in the Midst



Matched with flexibility, firmness and a dash of faith, even seemingly negative market changes can lead to prosperity.

By Brandi D. Thomas

“Change does not necessarily assure progress, but progress implacably requires change,” American historian Henry Steele Commager once said.

A bearded Michigan man with jovial eyes and a thankful spirit captures the essence of this quote. His name is Larry Boven.

While changing times have been ensuring the demise rather than progress of many others in the floriculture business, this Kalamazoo-based grower has taken change in stride, working with it instead of against it. While others have been scaling back, Larry expanded with 112,000 sq. ft. of open-roof greenhouses last year. While others have been declaring bankruptcy, Larry bought another business. While others have been bowing to chain stores' downward pressure on pricing, Larry has remained strong and even raised prices in some instances.

“It's amazing how well things work when you have a positive attitude,” Larry said, confirming that actions are usually begotten by a goal-oriented mind and positive outlook.

BUILDING FROM BACKGROUND

When Larry graduated from high school in 1957, he swore he never wanted to see another

greenhouse in his life. Like many others in horticulture, he grew up in the business, but the experience of his youth was from the ag side, in vegetable farming. His father transitioned from growing celery to growing flowers in the late 50s and early 60s.

After pursuing his own ideas away from the business for 2-3 years, something in Larry's blood made him return. He told his father he wanted to become his partner. His father laughed at him, though, saying if he could hire his son for \$3.00 per hour, why would he want to take him on as a partner? He gave Larry an alternative: If Larry bought his grandparents' 2 1/2-acre farm, his father would help him build greenhouses and get started in the business. “My dad and I never were partners,” Larry said, “but he was certainly very instrumental in helping me get started.”

Larry's first greenhouses were built in 1961-62 on his grandparents' farm, which he sold in 1970 so he could move to one of his current locations six miles away. He built one of the first Van Wingerden-manufactured greenhouses in Michigan that year, breaking away from the ranks of the small growers. “Prior to that, all of the growers had home-built greenhouses; they just took 2 x 4s and made their own.”

One of the first steel-manufactured greenhouses, the new construction measured 55,000 sq. ft. This new type of greenhouse set Larry apart and created waves in the Kalamazoo community. “Some of the older local

growers in particular said, ‘Impossible — it's too big of an investment; you'll never make it financially with that large of a greenhouse.’” Shortly thereafter, five of his friends followed Larry's lead and moved their businesses as well, creating a six-grower stronghold within a 1-mile community.

EXPANSION AND EFFICIENCY

Thirty-two years after that first steel structure was erected and successive expansions, Larry has a total of 735,000 sq. ft., including another range purchased in 1994 six miles away. Over the past few years, Boven's Quality Plants has transitioned from building plastic greenhouses to glass or acrylic, with all new construction originating in The Netherlands. Larry believes buying glass has been a worthwhile investment: “We like them because they allow more light transmission, we never have to change the plastic and there's no condensation dripping on our crops.”

Boven's most recent construction occurred in the summer of 2001. Larry built 112,000 sq. ft. of



Mixed containers are one of Larry Boven's specialty items. Only 25 percent of his production is concentrated in bedding plants and flats these days.



Employees working at the Van Boven facility, purchased in 1994. This range of pansies shipped to Frank's the day after GPN's visit.

dyna-glass, open-roof greenhouses with a 15-foot gutter height; a dual-shade and blackout system; 36 hanging basket eco-systems; an all-concrete, heated floor; and ebb-and-flood watering. "It's a very expensive facility," he admitted, "and we are just hoping that some day it will pay for itself with its more-efficient production systems. With the ebb-and-flood watering and the automated systems, our crops have been more uniform, and the amount of growers we need is less than in a conventional greenhouse." He also has a new Flier transplanter with a continuous plug tray system,

which pulls plugs as they travel down the line rather than out of each tray, as well as a Bouldin and Lawson soil-mixing system at each location. Boven's employs approximately 100 employees at peak season and about 60 full-time employees year-round.

STEADFAST AND SPECIALIZED

Boven's Quality Plants and the other growers who moved along with Larry are charter members of the Kalamazoo Valley Plant Growers Cooperative (KVPG), whose main customers are the big boxes, such as Home Depot, Wal-Mart and Lowe's.

Larry, who is on the board of directors and is current vice president of the KVPG, said, "We give a lot of credit for our success to the co-op, which has helped each one of us grow and helped us in many other areas." He sells approximately 25 percent of his production to the co-op and about 75 percent independently. Approximately 60-65 percent goes to Frank's Nursery & Crafts, representing a large portion of Boven's business.

Frank's filed Chapter 11 early last year, creating unease in many of its suppliers, including Boven's. "We were very concerned back when they filed," he said, "but very pleased when they were successful last spring." And with Frank's recent announcement that their new reorganization plan has been approved, it looks like they may be poised for a series of successful spring seasons.

Larry's close working relationship with Frank's buyer Lisa Oliver has helped the retailer to develop and support lucrative plant programs and Boven's to become a specialized grower. "Our spring production over the past 10 years has transitioned from 100 percent bedding plants to probably less than 25 percent flats and 75 percent potted items, like patio containers," Larry said.

Lisa believes what makes their

relationship so synergistic is good communication. "We share a lot of information about our businesses," she explained. "I try to explain to him how customers are shopping, and he shares what's going on at his end." She also cited traveling to the California Pack Trials together as a factor in their success. "We've refined our program more and more every year by going to the Trials. I could go alone and pick out something that's pretty," she said modestly, "but if it doesn't produce, then it isn't worth anything."

In fall 2001, Boven's started two new programs with Frank's called "Jack Frost" and "Autumn Annuals," which are unconventional fall annual color programs. Pansies guaranteed to winter-over are included, but the program also extends to zinnias, gazanias, marigolds and Proven Winners fall planters in different-sized containers. Successful thus far, Boven's and Frank's intend to continue the program this year.

One look at Larry's wholesale cost/retail price sheet for last year's fall program with Frank's shows one facet of why this relationship is working so well: Frank's unit retail price for each Boven product is approximately double the wholesale cost. Frank's is asking for more, and customers are buying. One of the

grower success

10-inch Autumn Fall Magic Combination Planters, for example,

GUIDE TO THE INSIDE

Here are some of the products you'll find at Boven's Quality Plants.

Automation:

Anderson injectors
Bouldin & Lawson media mixing machines
Cherry Creek Ecosystem
Dosatron injectors
Flier transplanter
Priva environmental system
Ridder tube motors

Heating/Cooling:

Cleaverbrooks boilers
Modine heaters
Wadsworth roof vents

Irrigation:

Cherry Creek double-rail watering booms

Plant material:

Flower Fields
HMA
Proven Winners

Structures:

DeCloet
Rough Brothers
Van Wingerden
Verbakel-Bomkas

sold for \$16.99 retail at Frank's last year. "I'm glad they're able to do that," Larry said, "I think it's a very positive thing for our industry." Unlike other large retailers, Frank's is not undercutting prices and contributing to the low margins that amount to nothing less than growers' collective castigation.

Boven's also grows hanging baskets of all varieties and spring bedding plants in a multitude of sizes, from 12-0-4s and 6-0-6s to 4-, 5-, 6-, 8-, 10-, 12- and 16-inch containers. Potted plants include New Guineas, gerbera daisies and caladium, as well as 4-inch herbs. Larry also started growing plugs this past January for his own production and that of local growers.

Larry is also one of the few growers left in the co-op who still produces poinsettias. "There were once approximately 12 growers growing them, but one by one, they fell away from it because the profit margins were so low. Eventually, there were only three poinsettia growers left in the Kalamazoo area that are members of the KVPG," he explained. In order not to have to follow the path of those other 12 growers, he decided to raise his prices. "My decision [to increase prices] had to do with either getting out or being profitable, and my customers accepted the increase," he said. He raised


poinsettia prices 15 percent for the 2001 Christmas season and sold out. For those growers out there who don't believe price increases can work: they can.

Part of the reason Larry was able to sell out also has to do with the quality of his product. The head buyer from a major chain came to see Larry's poinsettias in the greenhouse last year and validated this quality. "In 17 years," he said, "this is the nicest poinsettia crop I've seen."

MEETING CHANGE WITH CHALLENGE

So while many growers have been giving up poinsettias, laying off workers and even closing down for good, what has Larry been up to in recent days? Capitalizing on change. In Buffalo, N.Y., a grower was recently struggling to keep his head above water and encouraged Larry to make an offer to the bank for his 200,000-sq.-ft. operation. After two weeks of haggling with the bank, 150,000 sq. ft. of modern Dutch glass greenhouses and approximately 50,000 sq. ft. of plastic-covered structures were his. The KVPG has agreed to market the crops grown out of Buffalo. The product mix there will be similar to what Larry is now growing in Kalamazoo, including poinsettias. The previous owner's specialties at

the Buffalo facility were growing cuttings for other growers, a category that Larry also intends to continue producing. Dieter Ernst, previously of Holtkamp Greenhouses, has recently taken on the management responsibilities in Buffalo, and Larry is very confident that he and Dieter will be able to turn the business into a successful venture.

Boven's is focusing on increased efficiency at all of its facilities to stay competitive. "We're hoping that being more efficient is what's going to help us survive: More automation, better heating systems and labor-saving methods are some of the ways we are trying to implement better efficiency," said Larry. "We're going to try to get better pricing for the product that we grow. We pride ourselves on being one of the best growers, and we feel that a quality product deserves fair pricing." And these visions of change, with belief and determination, can be willed into both reality and progress. 

Brandi D. Thomas is associate editor for GPN.



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